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SCIENCE FICTION

NUMBER 25

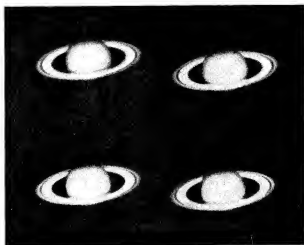


FOR READING THAT'S DIFFERENT

★ ★ ★ ★

THE RINGED WONDER

★ ★ ★ ★



*Four photographs of the planet Saturn
(Photo: Science Museum, London. Reproduced by permission of the Mount Wilson Observatory, California)*

by **KENNETH JOHNS**

SIXTH from the Sun, Saturn, often named the second most beautiful sight in the Solar System, is twice as far out into space as Jupiter from the warming Sun. Saturn is unique in the Solar System, perhaps, unique in the entire Galaxy, although the Galaxy is so vast that uniqueness must be rare, in that it possesses an unbelievably beautiful ring system surrounding it.

As Saturn plods around the Sun in a twenty-nine-and-a-half year orbit we see the rings appear to alter their positions, tilting and then disappearing for a few days every fifteen years as the edge faces us. The Rings are at 28° to Saturn's orbit, and 200,000 miles in diameter.

An observer from Earth can never see the rings full face on ; but the four photographs show Saturn as it was when the Ring was in one of its most favourable positions for photography.

Early astronomers, peering at Saturn, drew what they saw and produced some weird and bizarre celestial portraits before they recognised the Ring system for what it is. And then, of course, began the arguments and theories to explain it. For a considerable period it was generally accepted to be the remains of a satellite that had strayed too close to its primary and had been torn asunder by tidal force.

Yet this explanation gave no reason why the fragments should be so finely sub-divided.

Whilst most of Saturn's light comes from the Ring—the whole complex had a magnitude of 4.4 when the Ring is face on but only 0.9 when edge on—stars can be seen shining through the belts, little dimmed by the intervening matter.

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NEBULA

SCIENCE FICTION

Editor: PETER HAMILTON

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Look here . . .

Recently (as I write) I attended the first Glasgow showing of the film "The Incredible Shrinking Man" and found the experience somewhat disturbing. Not that there was anything particularly remarkable in the picture itself—after over five years as editor of NEBULA it takes a *really* unusual science-fiction movie, or story for that matter, to make any very lasting impression on me—it was the audience which monopolised my attention throughout the show. It could hardly have been otherwise, as they treated the film as an uproariously funny comedy and guffawed loudly throughout its entire showing time. The consensus of public opinion a few days later seemed to be that the picture was most definitely not worth looking at.

When this film was reviewed in NEBULA by Forrest J. Ackerman, who knows a great deal more about the science-fiction movie world than almost anyone else you will ever meet, he wrote ". . . the mood is set for an A production and an A is what we get . . . *I think this hits just about the right spot for the masses . . . Mr. and Mrs. Carey . . . are a natural young pair of married Americans so that the simple nature of the incident which blights their lives will be found believable . . . by the usual moviegoer.*" The italics are mine. Similar reviews appeared almost universally throughout Great Britain and America.

You may feel that on the strength of the one experience I describe above I have no right to assume that "Shrinking Man" was met with a similar public reaction wherever it was shown, but I have reliable reports from a large number of NEBULA readers which indicate that audiences all over the country reacted to this film in substantially the same way as the one in Glasgow. Not only that, but I am sure that everyone who reads this magazine will be able to bring to mind at least a dozen occasions on which a burst of laughter completely ruined the carefully built up atmosphere of one scientifiilm or another in cinemas both city and suburban throughout the country. Why, then, when many of these films are reviewed enthusiastically in newspapers and magazines alike, are they ridiculed in this way by the "man in the street" ?

Quite simply, I believe that the average member of the public is unwilling or unable to take science-fiction very seriously because it does not deal in terms of his own everyday experience. He is unable to associate himself with a character in the distant future, on another planet or in a predicament like that of the shrinking man. Consequently he is not impressed by the "seriousness" of what are, to him, situations remote from the reality of his own existence and so finds the whole thing good for a few laughs but unconvincing and really rather silly.

This conclusion, if it is indeed the correct one, would explain the short life of the recent science-fiction publishing boom and why, at the moment, so many first-class publications are going out of business. It would also indicate that science-fiction will never gain really wide

No Escape

The house had longed for company in all the years it had stood alone . . . its new occupants were the fulfilment of all its desires

Illustrated by Arthur Thomson

At the end of the long drive, where it lay like a folded grey ribbon between the elms, lay the house. The lights had switched themselves on with a quiet, mechanical precision a few minutes earlier. The silken curtains had twitched themselves across the open eyes of the windows, lidding and closing softly for the night.

But the house was not asleep.

It had waited quietly, patiently while the years had fled like ghosts about it, while the walls had mellowed with the sun and the frosts. The swallows had nested in the metal eaves, had flown away with the long winters and returned with the spring.

The grass-velvet lawns had grown themselves to ankle-height and then been snipped by the scurrying cutters with their hungry mouths full of steel teeth and blades.

Electric bees had sprinkled the drive and paths with drifting clouds of weed killer before the spring rains. The straggling bushes had been pruned and trimmed by reaching, plucking fingers of sword-edged steel.

Inside the house a hidden relay, embedded deep in the cellar, moved noiselessly, made electrical contact with a tiny rippling mercury pool, sent a current racing along silver veins. In one of the rooms, a slender metallic tape slid beneath an electronic eye. A switch whirred briefly, and music floated softly through a half-open window and drifted across the smooth lawns, fresh as a summer breeze.

Far away, out of sight, the latch of a gate clicked.

"Well," said Henry Bishop, exhaling contentedly. "At last, after all these years, a place of our own."

He closed the gate softly behind him with the flat of his hand.

"I'm still not quite certain, Henry." His wife, Vera, paused and looked about her where the moon laid a net of silver between the branches of the tall elms.

"Why, Vera? What's wrong with it?"

"I don't know."

"You've been nervous and jumpy all day." He picked up the cases, straightened with a grunt.

"It's just that there seemed to be something strange about this particular house, something—well, wrong with it."

"Nonsense. It's just your imagination."

They walked slowly along the drive. Music moved with them between the swaying branches. The drive was neat and well-kept under their feet. The scent of jasmine whispered on the cool air.

"Well," said Vera Bishop. "Is it all my imagination?"

They had turned a corner in the drive.

"I thought the house had been empty for several years. At least, since the Revolution."

"So it has." Henry Bishop paused, looked up. Yellow light burned steadily behind the drawn curtains. The music undulated about them hypnotically.

"Then who did all this?"

He felt the perspiration boil out on his face. The cool air caught at it and laid a chill upon his brow.

"I don't—"

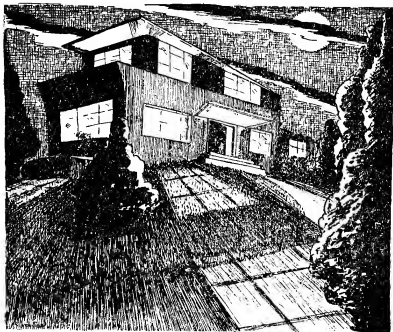
"And these lawns. Look at them! Freshly cut today."

"Somebody hired by the Sales Service. Just a part of the plan to sell the property. Nothing more."

He stepped off the drive. His feet sank into the soft grass. True they had bought the house for an absurdly low sum, less than half of its real value. But that was no reason to suspect that there was something wrong with it. No reason at all.

They reached the end of the drive. A quick change of scenery. Here was the house now, less than twenty feet away, the porch freshly painted and glistening in the moonlight.

The faint filming of luminescent paint flicked on at their approach. The door sighed open on noiseless hinges. Everything was so startling and unnatural that Henry Bishop felt the prickling of hairs on the back



of his neck and a tight little scream beginning at the bottom of his throat.

The house murmured soft music and exhaled the odour of fresh cooking through the open mouth of the door. The smell of French pastry, wine in an iced bottle with a napkin around the neck. The *feel* of cool starched cloths on a table lit by yellow candleshine.

"Are you sure it's all right to go in?" His wife's voice sounded peculiarly tensed and high-pitched.

"Of course."

He swallowed his fear, felt the terror melt like butter on his tongue. "Let's go in."

The light came on in the hallway as they stepped inside. Behind them, the door closed gently, the luminous glow faded in the porch and a hidden air-conditioner drew the scent of jasmine and night-scented stock into the house through the pores of the walls.

"Home at last," said Henry Bishop. He dumped the heavy cases on the floor, lifted his head and sniffed.

"My, but that smells good."

There was the unmistakable odour of fresh butter, eggs, cheese,

mayonnaise, all blended together; and the sound of a steak sizzling in a hot pan.

He took off his coat, hung it on the peg. Unseen, the panel opened, took the clothing into the wall where a hundred spider web brushes whirled and sucked it clean of dust and stains. A blur and the panel slid back with a faint sigh and there was the coat again, as clean as new.

"It moved!" cried Vera. "I saw it. I saw it!" She was almost crying, appalled by what she had seen.

She stood close beside him and he could feel the trembling of her body against his own.

"Can't you feel it, too? The lawns freshly mown, the drive in perfect condition, a meal ready, doors that open by themselves, lights switching on and off. It isn't natural. It's *uncanny*."

"There, there." He patted her shoulder. "It's a house, Vera; remember? Our house. It had me scared and puzzled a little at first until I remembered."

"Remembered?" She glanced up. "Remembered what?"

"You must have heard about the new houses they designed just before the Revolution. The luxury houses with every electronic gadget built in for your convenience. Automatic servants that do everything, all directed and controlled by an electronic brain in the cellar. This must be one of them."

Vera stared at him. "But they were all ordered to be pulled down and destroyed after the Revolution. It couldn't be."

"I know, I know. But maybe this was one that was overlooked, unnoticed. Forgotten maybe. After all, it's been seventeen years. The deeds could have been lost, misplaced."

"I don't know, Henry." She sat down wearily in a chair that moulded itself to her body, tilting gently back. Hidden odorphonics, activated by the pressure and warmth of her body, blew cool scents across her face, while the music in the air changed subtly. In spite of herself, she found it oddly relaxing.

Five minutes later, their bags had been whisked away by steel spiders, the clothes taken out and hung up carefully and neatly. Moth repellents were sprayed over them. The cupboard doors closed gently.

A table unfolded itself from the wall, slotted slender carved legs into position. Cups and saucers and plates slid upwards through slots in the polished top. Knives and forks and spoons followed.

Candles appeared in silver sticks, spluttered with flame. The lights dimmed. Henry and Vera Bishop sat down and watched the food, expertly prepared, slide in from the kitchen.

He stared down at his plate, then across at his wife.

"We may as well eat," he said throatily, "if we're to live here, we'll have to get used to it some time. May as well start now."

She nodded, nibbled slowly at her food. The meal over, the dishes were whisked away, slid out of sight down smooth chutes. There was a brief clattering of crockery from the kitchen, then silence. The house settled down to dream and to watch.

Together, they went through every room in the house, looking and examining and exclaiming at everything new. As they moved, doors unlocked themselves and pale, restful lights glowed on as they appeared. Electric fireflies glowed above their heads as they walked.

"Do you think we'll be happy here? Really happy?" she asked at last, when they had seen everything from the topmost attic that opened out into the moonlight, to the cellar where the brain hummed and purred to itself like a lazy animal.

"What more could we ask for?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'd rather do it all myself than have the house do it for me. That way I'd feel as though we owned the house and that it wasn't the house that owned us. All this makes me feel a little helpless and—yes, a little afraid too."

"Nonsense. There's nothing to be afraid of. Think of it. A house that does everything. Sweeps, cleans, cooks, trims the lawns and hedges. Everything. And all because someone slipped up at the Surveyor's Office and one of the old houses wasn't demolished as it should have been and we were lucky enough to buy it."

"But supposing they find out. What can they do to us if we don't report it?"

"Who's to know?"

"That agent who sold it to us. He knows. He must know."

Vera stared at the ceiling.

"Yes, you're right. He *did* know. I'm sure of that now," mused Henry. "But he wouldn't tell anybody." He laughed drily. "He'd land in far more trouble with the Government that we would."

She was silent at that, her lips locked tight.

That night, the singing stairs carried them up to the rooms on the first floor. The lights switched themselves off downstairs. Doors opened and closed as they passed through. The pores of the windows opened and sucked in the fragrance of the garden.

They lay quietly, side by side, the sheets cooling their bodies, the bed rocking gently, easing them to sleep.

He lay quite peacefully, letting his body relax, his limbs curved

slightly. He turned his thoughts over and over inside his head. Hell, but this was some house. Mentally, he smacked his hands together. Sheer luck that they had managed to get it at all. The agent had been damned secretive and reticent when he had mentioned the prospect to him at first.

That heap of electronic equipment down there in the cellar. It must have taken a genius to dream that up. Such a tremendous thing to be able to do everything. And now, quite naturally, it was rocking them to sleep.

The room woke them gently in the morning with the smell of freshly-ground coffee in their nostrils. Grapefruit juice, sharp and tangy, stood yellow in glasses by the bed. A low voice murmured the time from the corner. Clothes slid out of the corner closets, were draped over the chairs, ready to be put on.

"I think I'll take a shower," said Henry Bishop, yawning.

He went into the other room. Cool water splashed in a hundred needle jets onto his back. He revelled in it, turned and allowed them to sting his shoulders and chest.

Refreshed, he stepped back. The water turned itself off. Warm air sighed about him as his wet feet activated the hidden mechanism in the floor.

He was dry and pleasantly warm within a few seconds.

Breakfast was served in the dining room overlooking the garden.

The dishes cleared, they went outside, walked between the trees, the green bushes and the neat rows of multicoloured flowers.

Henry Bishop kept turning his head this way and that every few moments, expecting to see some busy gardener disappear the instant he looked round, just to catch the barest glimpse of him.

But there was no one there. No one moving ahead of them, or behind them, putting everything in order, keeping it all trim and perfect.

They walked among the elms. Behind them, the house kept an open eye on them, watchful, alert, taking care they did not wander too far.

"Henry."

"Yes, dear?"

"I wish you'd do something about the house. Switch it off for a while, or something."

"But that's impossible, Vera."

"But why? There's something awfully wrong here. I wish I knew what it was. It isn't the way it looks after us, attending to

everything we need. I've got used to seeing my food appear on the table as if by magic the moment we sit down, or watch the dishes vanish to be washed and dried and polished until they shine.

"I can imagine that mechanical brain down there in the cellar, always awake and alert, controlling everything. I can even visualise something moving out here, unseen, but cutting and trimming and planting."

"Then what is it you're still afraid of?"

"It's something more than all of these things. Something I can't quite explain. It's like a *feel*, a sense of possession. God, Henry, I even feel as though this house is alive. As if we just exist for it and for no other reason."

"But that's absurd."

"Is it? All the same, it's the way I feel. And I'm afraid."

"But what is it you want me to do?"

"I want you to look at that brain in the cellar. See if it can't be switched off for a while."

"And if it can't?"

His wife paused, took a deep breath, then said quickly, "Smash it. Break it into little pieces so that it can't run our lives. We've only been here a day and already it's doing things to us. Unpleasant things."

"All right. I'll have a look this afternoon."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

They went inside, sat in chairs that shifted to their bodily contours, and watched a three-dimensional film thrown onto a semi-opalescent wall. The hidden projector switched itself off as they got up and they went out into the spring garden until it was time for dinner. Again the quietly efficient service. The dishes placed before them, a gentle stream of music floating in from the other room.

"But I don't see anything wrong with all this, Vera."

"No? Wait until you've had it for a couple of years. Then you'll see. But by that time, you'll have become so dependent on it, you'll never be able to change. This house will mould you to its own pattern unless you act now. If you're afraid, I'll go down into that cellar and break up that infernal machine myself."

"No, no. I'll do it if you've set your mind on it. If you're sure that's what you want."

"Yes. Oh, yes." A quick nodding of her head.

"Remember. This is the chance of a lifetime you're throwing away. It will never happen again. Not to us, anyway."

"I don't ever want it to happen again. I want a house that is a house and nothing more. Not a mixture of a nursemaid and a policeman."

"Aren't you getting a little hysterical? "

"Oh, Henry, if only you knew how I really feel. Ever since we first opened that gate and came in. I wish to God we'd stayed outside and never seen the place. That we'd kept on walking and walking and never stopped until we were miles away from here."

He looked at the floor beneath his feet as though trying to see down into the cellar below. He chewed on the food and found he had suddenly lost his appetite. He felt jumpy and keyed up.

At four o'clock, he couldn't stand it any longer. He found a heavy steel bar in the storeroom at the back of the house and carried it through into the living room.

Vera looked at it, then up at him.

"Are you going now? "

He nodded.

"Then I'll come with you. I feel I want to be there when it happens."

Preoccupied, he let himself down the stone steps into the cool dimness of the cellar. Here, the lights were not as bright as those in the other rooms of the house. At the bottom, he saw the brain.

How many years had this thing been running, keeping the house going although it was unoccupied? Twenty, twenty-five? It was difficult to estimate.

It was a dim place, smooth and polished, with the glitter and array of steel filling every corner of the room. There was the feel of movement here and an invisible rippling that was never stayed. Wires snaked and ran into a maze of silver and copper veins that vanished up through the ceiling to run below the floors of the rooms above.

The purring was still there, deep inside the bowels of the machine.

Little sparks cracked back and forth like small, faint glow-worms hissing through the air, winking on and off, on and off. Lights glowed red and green and yellow and blue. Valves hummed and shone purple.

For a long moment he was filled with an incomprehensible wonder for the man who had designed and built such a marvellous machine as this, whirring with the power of the atoms themselves.

He lifted his arm above his head, brought the bar smashing down against the metal casing. It bent, then snapped harshly as he struck again. Valves shattered into slivers of cold flame. The humming

turned into a rising shriek that hammered at their ears. Henry Bishop stumbled back, his hands clasp ing his head, covering his ears.

But he knew by some sense deep within himself that he had to finish the task now he had started. He didn't want to stay in this place, not with that mangled machine screaming away at the top of its voice.

It would never stop. It would go on screaming murder for ten thousand years as long as the power pack remained intact. Disturbing everything, making it impossible to talk or live in the house.

He lifted the bar again. It was best this way. He made the necessary extra effort and smashed down again and again and again.

The outer casing buckled. Pain jarred redly along the muscles of his arms and up into his shoulders, but he felt little of this. The yelling and the screaming stopped. The humming was ended and silence filled the entire house like a light switched off.

"It's finished," said Vera.

He did not speak but felt the rush of coldness to his face.

Upstairs, they bumped into the door as it failed to open for them.

Henry Bishop laughed nervously, twisted the handle and threw the door wide.

"Now we'll have to get used to it all over again," he said. "Deep down inside, I feel as though I've had everything done for me for the past thousand years. It'll take some getting used to—this having to do every single thing for yourself."

"We'll manage," said Vera, and there was relief in her voice.

"I suppose so."

They went into the dining room. Vera closed the curtains with a twitch of the hand, pulling them across the windows. Then she walked slowly across the room as though savouring every step and pressed the switch near the door.

The lights flickered on above their heads.

"That's better," said Vera. She nodded contentedly.

The clock chimed quietly.

Four-thirty.

Five o'clock.

Five-fifteen. The table slid out of its groove in the wall, locked itself into position. The candles appeared, flickered into flame with little sparkles of light.

Food appeared in front of them. Knives and forks and spoons. There came an almost inaudible clatter from the kitchen.

Henry Bishop half rose to his feet, then sank back into his chair.

"This is impossible." He whirled in his seat and stared at his wife.

"We smashed it this afternoon. Over two hours ago." Vera Bishop sounded almost hysterical.

They ran downstairs, into the cellar, and looked at the pile of splintered metal and glass. The brain was broken beyond repair. It lay cold and silent and shattered.

"Not that," said Henry Bishop with conviction.

"Then what can it be?"

Henry Bishop began to perspire. He could feel the fear climbing up inside him, swamping out everything else.

"This is ridiculous. We'll go up there and find that we've dreamed it all. That the table is right back where it was before and we'll have to manhandle it out and lay the crockery ourselves. Yes, that's what we'll find."

They ran up the cellar steps, into the dining room. The door swung silently open for them as they rushed inside. The candles on the long table flamed off the polished top and the silver sticks and ornaments.

"We can't stay here, Henry. I won't remain in this house another night. I knew we ought never to have come."

"This is foolishness." Henry Bishop felt his lips shaping the words, forcing them out. "But maybe you're right, after all. Maybe it is dangerous to remain here."

He nodded his head slowly.

"I think I can understand now, why the agent was so anxious to sell at such a ridiculously low price."

The house was full of ghostly things, unseen, hands that moved and touched and were anxious to help. Before, there had been a logical explanation for all of them but now, with that explanation so decisively removed, it was different.

Now, it was *really* frightening.

They packed their clothes, stuffed their suitcases to the brim, stood on them desperately to click the locks. When they were all packed and ready, they walked quietly through the empty, murmuring house, to the front door, ignoring the mellow lights that flashed on and off, on and off, around them.

The front door was shut, solidly, in front of them. It did not open as they approached. Henry Bishop put his case on the floor, fumbled with the door-handle. His fingers were trembling violently.

"Vera!" he cried. "It's locked. I can't open it!" He twisted the knob crazily.

"The back door!" His wife caught his arm, fingers biting into the flesh. "Hurry!"

They ran through the house, the suitcases forgotten in the hall.

The back door flipped open on its hinges as they rushed and jostled forward. It seemed to hesitate as though uncertain of itself, then began to swing shut.

"Quickly!"

He stumbled, caught himself desperately, hustled his wife through into the jasmine-scented night, squirmed his body madly. He could feel the door close, clutch at his middle, squeeze, push, heave, crush. And then he was through and the lock clicked behind him with a final, explosive crack, almost of anger and frustration.

"It tried to stop us!"

He stared wildly at his wife, at the moon riding the trees, his face pale and sweating. His coat was torn and there was a smear of blood on the back of his left hand.

"It did its darndest to prevent us from getting out, from leaving."

"Never mind, never mind." Now, she seemed the more composed of the two. "We're here, outside. Let's get away from this terrible place, as far away as possible. I still don't feel completely safe."

"Yes, yes. You're right." The insane urge to run, to feel his feet flying beneath him, to sprint, yell, hustle, shout, exploded in him. He stopped the shaking in his legs. With a tremendous effort of will, he stilled the fear that was screaming with a big mouth in his brain.

Frightened animals, they fled around the moonwashed side of the house. A light flicked on in one of the rooms. A huge yellow eye that sought them out, pinning them to the green lawn like a couple of butterflies to a board.

Henry Bishop could feel that light burning into his back as he ran towards the drive, jumping small, neatly-tended beds of jasmine and night-scented stock. His wife floundered beside him.

Her breathing came in short, frightened gasps. She was sobbing quietly to herself.

Then, quite suddenly, they were on the drive and there it was, stretching away and away, cool and shaded and empty in the moonlight. Gravel crunched under their scurrying feet.

The nightmare flicked away. The house was out of sight. Somewhere behind them. Henry Bishop began to walk slowly while the

trembling vanished and his body was drained of all the fear and hysteria and emotion.

For the first time in that long day, he was able to think clearly, logically.

That house now—how had it managed to continue doing everything like that even after they had smashed the delicate electronic equipment in the cellar? Was there another brain tucked away somewhere, out of sight, still guiding and controlling the various functions like a second heart, pumping electric blood to the nerve centres and arteries, along spider-lines of purest silver, stretched across non-conductive bones of glass and porcelain?

Or had the place been functioning for so long that it had, at last, over the years, become alive; capable of thinking on its own without the purely mechanical aid of a superficial brain, elaborated and built by Man?

The more he thought about it the less fantastic and the more probable it seemed. He almost laughed out loud. A house that was alive?

He repeated the thought inwardly, idly. It sent a kind of chill running up and down the muscles of his back. It couldn't happen really. Extremely improbable, of course.

Forget it. Just let us get away, miles away.

But, he figured vaguely, just suppose it were true. That house, standing there all these years, empty and alone, with no one inside and only the outside things to be attended to.

Cutting the lawns and the bushes, arranging beds of flowers and removing the tangled undergrowth from the tall elms. And all the time, it had been there, waiting; waiting with a mechanical, never-ending patience for someone to come and live in it.

And when they had smashed the brain, it didn't matter a damn as far as the house was concerned. Because that was only an outward symbol. It lived because of itself and not because of some eternally humming machine in the basement.

He stopped and listened. The twilight was very quiet. The night wind whispered among the murmuring leaves. The grass sighed gently.

It was a terrible thing to contemplate. Thank God, they had managed to escape in time. Another few minutes . . .

They turned the bend in the drive.

Suddenly he began to shake and cry. His hands jerked up over his eyes. His face was quite cold.

His wife screamed. She screamed three times.

"Oh, God—no!" muttered Henry Bishop through his teeth.

The drive stopped twenty yards further on and beyond it lay the house, eyes gleaming yellow, the porch shining with luminous paint, the front door swinging gently open like a welcome.

"We must have taken the wrong turning somewhere. Yes, that's it."

They turned on their heels, hurried back along the pale ribbon of the drive, away from the house.

Five minutes later, the drive turned abruptly, the trees thinned sharply, the moonlight fell in a dull washing of yellow onto the rolling lawns. Beyond them, imperturbable, waiting, lit and polished and warm, inviting, stood the house.

Henry Bishop felt his arms drop numbly by his sides. He felt dull and empty inside, his brain hollow and strange.

"There is no escape," he said finally, thickly, choking on the words. "It's alive. The damned thing *really* is alive. As alive as we are. And it doesn't mean us to get away."

He looked round at his wife's face in the moonlight, pale and drawn. Her eyes were wide and round, her lips parted.

"We may as well go in then," she said, resigned. "No sense in standing out here all night."

They walked into the porch. Boards sank gently beneath their feet.

Electrical contacts were made, subtly. Currents flowed along repaired spider-webs, linked and counterflowed.

The house murmured softly and played their favourite waltz. The glittering cloud of electric fireflies winked and shone around their bare heads as if in welcome. The door opened wider.

From inside came the smell of fried chicken, mint julep and fresh sauce.

Vera Bishop paused. She looked at her husband questioningly, her hand laid restrainingly upon his arm.

Together, they stepped inside.

The door shut.

The luminous paint on the porch walls was wiped away, silently.

Brief Encounter

*Patricia would get a man in spite of all
those who sought to thwart her desires*

Illustrated by Gerard Quinn

The city wore its silence like a robe. And silence became it: it gave it a dignity it had largely lacked in life. The skeletons were decorous too. They didn't sprawl or lapse into mere heaps of bones. They reclined serenely, as though each body had been laid out religiously and the last rites given. Segmitis was an easy death and began with a doze.

The rats had done their job cleanly and without haste: there was plenty of food for all and no one to disturb them. There was nothing to fight for or to run from. They fed quietly, reflected awhile, dozed, and died. And were eaten in their turn.

Patricia remembered the city as once it was: when thousands of pedestrians clashed on the sidewalks like opposing armies and in the streets the cars jockeyed for position like racing chariots. Penning them in these overcrowded ways were walls of plate-glass. Behind the glass, magically withheld by the invisible laws of economics and sociology, were the prizes they were hurrying for: the shiny big cars, the mink coats, the console TV sets.

She first saw the city on such a day when she was sixteen.

She was fat and homely even in those days, and aware of her lack of attraction for boys. She was also aware of her lack of money. She frowned through the transparent barrier, resenting its presence. She regarded the minks, the sable stoles, the flimsy primrose evening dresses, the tiaras and necklaces that scorned the label "Genuine" because everyone knew that behind those particular windows they *were*.

And she vowed: "One day I shall walk into these shops and have anything I like."

She meant that. Fat she might be, but not flabby: her mind



was as tough as gristle. It might take time, it would take ruthlessness, but she would get what she wanted in the end.

And now, any and every day, she could walk into those shops and have anything she liked. The invisible laws were broken. Civilization couldn't stop her: there was no civilization.

Civilization had been over-cautious. It had refused to use the hydrogen bomb because it wanted in some form to survive the war. Instead, it experimented carefully with bacteriological warfare. The virus of segmitis was nothing like so careful. It went bustling rudely about the world in and out of the fleshy sanctums, indifferent to stations, nationalities, ideologies, souls, or even anti-bodies.

But a chosen few of the violated were equally indifferent to it. Patricia was one of them. It had made her feel sleepy for a while, and that was all.

She knew she wasn't alone in the world, nor even in Britain. But there weren't many people left. So far she'd seen only two, both women: one at Southampton, one at Salisbury. They were very old and she didn't worry about them.

She hadn't seen a man but she believed there must be one some-

where. There had to be. In all the stories she'd read about the end of the world by decimation, there was always the Adam and Eve gimmick. There was often only one sample of each, but never less.

What had happened recently had kept faithfully to the conventional grooves of those stories. Therefore it followed almost axiomatically that somewhere there survived a man for her, a man whom the Lonely Hearts Club had never succeeded in providing for her, a man in no position to discriminate about his mate. But to get him she might have to fall back on smoke signals, it seemed.

Either her instinct or her memories had guided her to make the long trek from the West Country to London. There had been eight million people in London. Surely there were some left?

But she'd now been here for two months without seeing a soul. She had established herself in a flamboyantly luxurious apartment overlooking an area once claimed by the citizens (as Times Square and the Place de la Opera had also been claimed) as the centre of the world. Maybe the proximity of Eros had subconsciously influenced her, but the choice also had logic behind it. Anyone exploring London would inevitably visit the Circus, if only for the sake of sentiment.

After a time she became tired of looking out of the window and finding, day after day, that the only other inhabitant of the Circus was the God of Love. He was a nice-looking boy but one could scarcely expect much response from a well-shaped chunk of aluminium. However, she'd make him carry a torch for her, in a sense. With some difficulty she managed to hang a poster from his free arm. It said:

I AM LIVING IN LONDON, NOT FAR
FROM HERE. PLEASE CONTACT ME BY
FIRING THE GUN IN THE CASE BELOW.

P. STANLEY.

The gun which she left in its case on the steps had come from a famous sports store in Piccadilly. The cartridges she'd put in with it were blanks. She had a considerably better gun in her apartment, together with cartridges that were not blanks.

She had hesitated over the "P. Stanley" but finally decided to be non-committal. One secret of being the master of any situation was not to lay all one's cards on the table, and she intended always to be the master—even if the man turned out to be the film star of her dreams.

Again, the first reader of the notice might be another woman. Patricia didn't object too strongly to a man hunting her, knowing that she was a woman. But she didn't want a woman on her trail

knowing that she was a woman. She allowed that there might be saints, but she never visualized any of them as female. Men might be brutal or they might be kind. But women she was a woman and therefore she knew what they were like: predatory, intolerant, jealous, ruthless.

Mainly because of that, she carried a small but lethal automatic in her handbag.

The days passed slowly in the silent city. Patricia inspected the poster and the gun daily and neither appeared to have been touched.

Spring came, a time of sun and showers and something in the blood. Patricia became restless.

Was she really alone in the city? Should she not forage further afield?

One warm bright day she stood on the top floor of London University staring at the fresh green woods on the distant hills of Hampstead. Daffodils were growing wild up there and no doubt a fresh cool breeze was stirring the leafy branches. Down here in the city nothing stirred except her blood. And that seemed to be racing. She was alive, more alive than she ever remembered being before.

She looked at the far woods again. She recalled Sunday evening walks up there, herself always alone, while all about her young lovers sauntered hand in hand between the trees.

She gave a great sigh of bitter longing.

The woods called, but she was afraid to answer that call. The Circus remained the best bet—surely? Perhaps the very day she turned her back on it a man would come—and go. Even at this moment he might be approaching, coming from the south over Westminster Bridge.

She turned from the window and went down the stairs.

Back in the Circus Eros remained poised untiringly upon the ball of one foot. His stringless bow and invisible arrows of love were a mockery. So was the poster he bore: she felt like yanking the stupid thing down.

To calm herself she dressed in her best summer frock, gaily flowered, made up her face and took out with her a pale lemon parasol to keep the early afternoon sun from dazzling her eyes. She carried her handbag slung from her shoulder.

She walked below the turrets and cupolas of Whitehall to the Victoria Embankment, and along beside the river. The air was fresher here, and the sight of the quietly flowing water soothed her. She recalled, from school, the Tennysonian jingle:

"Men may come, and men may go,
But I go on for ever."

It ran through her head, over and over, and became wishfully abbreviated: "Men may come, men may come, men may come . . ."

Presently, she found herself on Westminster Bridge, waiting. Someone was coming. She sensed it. The man from the south? She leaned on the parapet looking steadily along the bridge between the blocks of the County Hall and the big hospital. And as she waited the serenity of the afternoon settled on her. The sun was benignly warm, the brown river ran gently. On such a spring day as this there *must* be other life about besides her own. Strong male life too.

"Waitin' for someone?" asked a voice behind her.

The shock of hearing another voice, suddenly, was great. With it came a wave of disappointment. It was a female voice and coarse at that.

Patricia composed herself and turned.

The girl surveying her was perhaps twenty. She had a fine tan and was showing plenty of it. She was wearing merely one piece of a two-piece swim-suit, and sandals. It seemed that she was accustomed to going around that way for her breasts were as brown as her legs. Her eyes were pale blue and showed well against the bronze. Her hair was Celtic black and reached to her slim waist. She wore no make-up, but her lips were very red.

The two looked each other over from top to toe and back, in the calculating way peculiar to women. Patricia sought a flaw in the other, and apart from the unmusical voice, could not find one.

What the young girl found became evident. She smiled sneeringly, crushingly—and in the act gave back to Patricia her self-possession. For the smile was ugly, and the tan apparently extended to the teeth, which, additionally, were spotted with caries.

Patricia said nothing, which slightly disconcerted the other.

"Dressed to kill, ain't yer?" ventured the girl, presently. "Ain't much use, is it, when anybody can 'elp themselves to the best clothes goin'?" Lord, I've thrown away better rags than you've got on."

"It so happens that I didn't dress to impress you," said Patricia, levelly.

"Who did you want to impress, then—men? You got some funny ideas about men, lovey. They're not interested in 'ow women dress; only 'ow they undress. But maybe you knew that all the time. Maybe that's really why you're all dressed up."

"And presumably why you're undressed."

"Of course. A girl's got to make the most of 'erself."

"Then you'd better go and see a dentist."

The girl flushed.

"Now, see 'ere, Fatty—"

"Oh, shut up!" snapped Patricia. "What the hell difference does it make whether we dress or undress or jump in the river? There aren't any men left."

The girl looked at her narrowly. "Who says not?" she said, quietly.

Patricia caught her breath. "You—You mean you've seen one?"

"More than *seen* one," hinted the girl, her unpleasant smile returning.

"Where?"

"Wouldn't you like to know!"

Patricia closed her parasol deliberately and leaned it against the parapet. She clicked open her handbag, dug in it, and suddenly the little pistol flashed in the sun. She held it a foot from the girl's bosom, which began to display signs of agitation.

"Where did you meet this man?" Patricia persisted.

"Put that thing away, madam—miss—please. You wouldn't—"

"I would. Don't run, or I'll shoot you in the back. Answer me."

"Up on 'Ampstead 'Eath. 'Es not very bright, really. Nice-looking chap, mind you, and young too, but kinda dopey. Always spoutin' poetry. Not my kind. Put that gun away, lady, go on."

"What are you doing in my area?"

"Your area? You don't own all London, y'know. I gotta right to 'unt 'ere, same as you. What d'you call your area?"

"Anywhere within five miles of Piccadilly Circus."

"Picc—Did you 'ang up that notice at the Circus?"

"You read it?"

"No, I can't read. But I thought it looked funny. You live near the Circus?"

"Never mind," said Patricia, and then, as the girl began to giggle, "What's funny?"

The girl stopped giggling. "Nothing."

Patricia searched her face. "You're hiding something. What's amusing you? Tell me, or by heaven—"

The girl blurted: "It's only that a man lives right near the Circus. I seen 'im. A big tall man. Looks a proper gent."

"What? What?" stammered Patricia.

"I seen 'im twice. Both times I called out to 'im, and 'e ran away. The first time I lost 'im down an alley. The second time

I chased 'im across the Green Park. He runs like a bloomin' champion. Left me standin'. Ain't you ever seen 'im?"

Patricia didn't answer. She was thinking.

The girl looked around her uneasily, as if seeking an excuse to go. The tall tower of the Houses of Parliament stood silently over streets as empty as the eyeholes of the skeletons, and the hands of Big Ben were clasped together to register that it was five past one. Big Ben had been claiming that it was five past one for almost a year now.

"Look," said the girl, suddenly. "You can 'ave my feller up at 'Ampstead. 'E won't run away. 'E'll be glad to see you. You leave me this pigeon in Piccadilly. I'll catch up with 'im one day."

"I'm afraid you won't," said Patricia. "I'm sorry, but I can't risk having any rivals around."

She raised the gun a trifle and pulled the trigger. The girl whose name she did not know fell backwards under the impact of the bullet, her arms flung wide. Her young body lay draped over the grey old parapet like a virgin laid on a sacrificial altar stone. Her breasts pointed to the bright blue sky of spring and her long jet hair hung down towards the scummy water. Patricia replaced her gun, seized both the slim ankles and heaved. There was a dirty white splash near the foot of one of the piers, and then the brown river had absorbed the brown body.

Patricia picked up her parasol, hesitated, then tossed it over the parapet too. She was impatient to get to the Circus and set off in quick strides.

When she got there she noticed at once that the gun-case on the steps had been moved a couple of yards from where she'd left it. But probably the girl had done that. Nevertheless, Patricia opened it. There was a note on fine vellum paper stuffed into the trigger-guard of the gun. It was terse almost to the point of discourtesy.

"I'm not far from here, too. Tell me more about yourself."

J. Harrison."

It was he! Or was it? J for John—or Jean, or James, or Josephine .? She was annoyed with the writer for playing her own game.

She examined the gun. It hadn't been fired. That annoyed her too.

After a moment of reflection she scribbled across the note "PTO," and on the back she wrote: *"Let's meet here. Fire the gun and wait.—Pat."*

Then she went up to her apartment and settled herself comfortably at the window with a pair of field-glasses at one elbow and

a box of chocolates at the other.

The afternoon was very long. No one came. The sun sank and slowly the shadows filled the unlit Circus, submerging Eros. Then it was night. Patricia dozed off, still by the window.

Late in the night she was dreaming. It was a pleasant dream. She was walking along Oxford Street and all the shop windows were ablaze with strip lighting, and from behind her, from all the shop doorways, came soft wolf whistles. One of her admirers began to follow her, a long way behind, whistling melodiously. It was a sad little tune. Gradually she awakened to it.

She was in her room and the plaintive whistling was dying away somewhere down there in the quiet streets.

She fought herself properly awake and peered hard through the window. There was nothing to see but darkness. She found a torch and stumbled down the stairs and out into the cool air of the Circus.

Six streets converged on the Circus. Which of them had the whistler taken? She looked a little way down each of them in turn, waving her torch, but saw no other light nor heard any further sound.

Then she looked in the gun-case. There was a fresh sheet of vellum notepaper there. Written on it was: "*Dear Pat, I'll meet you here tomorrow at sunset. No, I refuse to fire the gun—I abominate noise. Jeffrey.*"

It *was* a man! Her heart started to pound. She returned to her apartment in a happy daze, made herself some tea on the oil stove, lit a cigarette and settled down to wait for the dawn. She was too excited to sleep further, and the fire within her could not be damped down until sunset.

She chain-smoked through the rest of the night, trying to visualize what sort of man Jeffrey was. The girl had said he was big and tall and a gentleman. Presumably he was moderately young and physically fit, for he'd outrun the girl. But why had he run from her? Patricia told herself that it was because he was sensitive to vulgarity—his last note indicated that—and although the girl had been pretty, her utter lack of good taste and modesty was obvious at a glance.

Occasionally Patricia found herself humming that sad little tune of his, which she'd now identified: Tchaikovsky's *Chanson Triste*. Jeffrey, it seemed, was a music-lover.

In the pale dawn she dressed very carefully in quiet colours, modestly, tastefully, and was at pains to get her stocking seams straight.

Then she set off hunting, quartering the immediate neighbourhood. She could write off most buildings after a brief examination of their

halls, where the dust-coated floors showed no signs of footprints. But some were doubtful and she wasted much time plodding around in them, opening doors and climbing stairs.

By noon she was hot, dusty, rather tired and irritable. She came out into Piccadilly, wondering which way to turn.

Then she heard it—distant music. An orchestra, or rather, a recording of one. Her tiredness and irritation vanished. Her heart melted at the music. It was Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet* Overture, and it was building up towards the introduction of the love theme. There could have been no more appropriate music for her. Jeffrey must be feeling as she felt.

She traced the strains to the Albany, that ancient and exclusive private way, a nest of luxurious and strictly bachelor apartments. She pushed at the gate and it opened. She wandered along the narrow way. The music was much louder and the Montagues and Capulets were clashing with a great ringing of swords.

She found the right stairway, and paused at the bottom of it to mop and then powder her face. She was trembling, and her finicking amounted to small improvement. As she smoothed her dress down, the music stopped suddenly in the middle of the battle. Presumably the noise had become a little overpowering for Jeffrey.

She braced herself, and went upstairs. There were three doors. She heard a slight movement behind one, and pushed it gently open.

A tall, broad man in a silk dressing-gown was in the act of putting another record on the old-fashioned acoustic gramophone. He looked up, raising his eyebrows. She saw at once that he was strikingly handsome. His eyes were big and dark, his nose thin and aristocratic, his lips rather full but quite firm. His black hair was brushed immaculately. His short sideboards were cleanly shaven and just beginning to grey. She put his age at thirty-five.

And then his brows came down in a frown. There was antipathy in his aspect.

"Who are you, and what are you doing here?" His voice was cultivated, almost exquisitely so.

"I'm—I'm Pat."

The antipathy changed to utter disappointment and frustration. His eyes held pain. He sighed.

"Pat? I thought you were a—"

"Yes?"

"Never mind. I'm sorry, Pat, I shan't be along at sunset after all."

Patricia gave a little hurt cry. "Am I really so repulsive? I'm

not very old really, and I'm sure I could slim—"

"It isn't that. I just want to be left alone. You're probably quite a sweet wom—girl. But I'm a natural recluse. I prefer to live in solitude here. My books and records and paintings and memories are sufficient solace."

"Solace for what? Was there another woman?"

"No, Pat. You wouldn't understand."

"Oh." Patricia turned away. Her eyes were moist with her own disappointment. "You are Jeffrey?" she muttered, clutching at the flimsiest of straws.

"I'm afraid so."

Patricia wandered around the room, picking up this and that aimlessly, trying to pull herself together. She looked dully along the bookshelves, seeing familiar titles: *Leaves of Grass*, *Moby Dick*, *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, *Apostate*, *Bevis*, *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*.

She looked at the fine glassware, the etchings, the oil-paintings which seemed to be mostly of young men, the sculptures and the thick rugs, and realised that elegance of a kind alien to her unified the room.

Jeffrey watched her with growing impatience.

"Tut-tut." He reached out and adjusted the position of the statuette copy of Michelangelo's "David," which she had replaced all of an inch from where it had stood.

Often before she had been made to feel that she wasn't wanted, but never so forcibly and unmistakably as now.

"I'll be going, then," she said, listlessly.

"Goodbye—and good luck," he said, quickly and relievedly.

She closed the door behind her. Halfway down the stairs she broke down into tears. As she sobbed, the gramophone started again. This time it was a heart-breaking wail of despair and loneliness, again fitting her mood. It was the last movement of Tchaikovsky's last symphony. Jeffrey seemed to have a strong penchant for the melancholy Russian. Even in her grief, part of her mind wondered why.

And then a suspicion sprang to life and spread like a fast-growing evil weed. She might be quite wrong, she told herself. But the weed gathered strength from small selected evidences and grew all over her mind, darkening it, strangling reservations for the side of innocence, killing merciful judgment.

She dried her eyes, set her lips in a prim line, and marched back up the stairs. She flung open the door. Jeffrey was sitting dejectedly in the chair by the gramophone. He raised a startled, tear-stained face. The tears did not touch her heart: they were not for her, and

so they only strengthened her purpose.

She shot him twice as he sat there, and then made quite sure that he was dead.

The heart-cry of the *Pathétique* suddenly changed into a silly scratching noise. She lifted the tone-arm from the record and slammed the lid shut. Then she slammed the door behind her just as noisily. But all the noise in the world could not disturb him now.

Back in her own apartment she packed essentials for her move to Hampstead.

In the early afternoon she set out, carrying them.

As she reached Eros, she paused and looked up at him. He seemed almost like an old friend now, so she told him confidentially: "I had to do it, you know. I never had much on the ball at any time and I'm past my best now. A girl's got to watch out for herself. Especially me. I just can't afford to risk having any rivals around."

Then she went on past him, beginning the long walk to the promise in the north.

WILLIAM F. TEMPLE

NEBULA No. 26 . . .

Earth lies devastated by atomic war and the members of a Martian survey ship write it off as a desert and useless for their purpose—except one, who stays behind to look for survivors of the dispersed and almost annihilated human race. The story of his search is the background to a heart-warming novelette by that master of science-fiction, Eric Frank Russell, which we proudly present in next month's *Nebula*.

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The First

*He had been a pioneer, the very first to reach the moon . . .
but the truth was unimportant on so great a day.*

Illustrated by Arthur Thomson

The city was enchanted. It was a colossal music box blaring forth a thousand chants of victory. It was a rainbow torn down from the sky and poured over the earth. It was a magic nursery through which eager-eyed children swarmed to behold a sparkling new toy.

Three spacemen, three conquerors-to-be, sat stiffly in the back seat of a blue-bannered convertible. The car moved snail-like toward the Capitol steps, escorted by a hundred bands, eight hundred flowered floats, and ten thousand marching men.

In its front seat, standing, waving to the crowd, was Captain George Everson. Everson—the legless man. Everson—the bronzed giant whose first rocketship had exploded at take-off, and yet who had lived to walk on artificial legs, to build a second rocket, and to infect all the world with his square-jawed determination.

It was barely eight o'clock on this April morning of the year 1982, yet the onslaught against the spacemen had begun. Confetti rained on them. Breeze-filled flags dazzled them. Band music deafened them. The flow of shouting spectators dizzied them. It was a day when holiday hats and mathematicians' formulae, roasted peanuts and ancient dreams were blended in a fury of joy.

The magic wand that had enchanted the city was Everson's *Lunar Lady*. And it *was* like a wand—1,000 tons of it, poised on the take-off field on the outskirts of the city, its needle-point nose turned skyward and shining silver in the morning sunlight.

Tonight, at sunset, when the city was saturated with speeches and music and popcorn and prayer, the great rocket would rumble and belch flame and rise. Mankind would begin its first flight to the moon!

So it seemed that people of all the earth were basking in joy and hope, every man, woman and child—with one exception .

John Simon rose from his bed, awakened by the rhythm of march music outside his small apartment. He shuffled sleepily to a

window. He blinked at the array of flags and bunting that lined the street.

The music became louder.

He ran a shaky, withered hand over his wizened face, brushed stringy white hair back from his forehead. His lips curved in a grim half-smile.

"It's starting," he murmured, "—the day that should have been yours."

He realized that he was talking to himself again. But although he was only fifty-six, talking aloud seemed natural to him. It not only eased his loneliness, it also helped him to clarify his muddled thoughts.

"Today is your last chance. Not tomorrow or the next day. It *has* to be today."

The thump-thump of a base drum was like a gigantic heart-beat shaking all the land. The blare of trumpets was a victory song, strong enough to live in the mind of a man forever, strong enough to silence forever the voices of fear and loneliness that might haunt a spaceman.

"That's the music," John Simon muttered, "that should have been yours."

A crimson-lettered banner said: EVERSON—THE FIRST.

What a mockery those words were! It was like worshipping an evil, false-faced goddess. The illusion should and must be destroyed.

He jerked erect. He must move quickly. He must put an end to this cosmic lie.

He dressed in a freshly-cleaned, single-breasted tweed suit. His tie was hastily knotted. There was no time for breakfast.

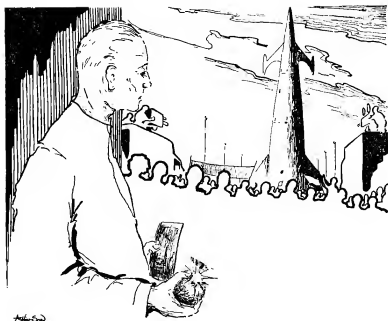
He strode to a drawer of his bureau, yanked it open, dug away a layer of underclothing. He smiled as he beheld two objects.

His hands moved gently. His hands were like those of a florist arranging a garland of delicate blossoms. They were like the hands of a surgeon fearful of a fatal error. They were like the hands of a father upon his first-born.

He picked up the stone.

It was a bright, phosphorescent green, mottled with flecks of gold and no larger than an apple. Its glow seemed to fill all the room. John remembered the cave at the base of Luna's Mount Pico from where he'd chipped it. The cave's eerie glow had almost seemed alive, quivering and pulsing with alien energy. John, in his space-suit and half blinded, had staggered when he left with his specimen.

Next, he touched the photograph.



It was a moment of eternity captured long ago and still imprisoned in a wrinkled, yellowed paper. On it was the rocket, the *Marilyn*, which had been his home for fifteen years. Behind it, on a rise in the pock-marked Lunar terrain, was one of the launching stations which had never been used. In the background loomed the nightmarish Tenerife Mountains. And hovering above all in a sky of black velvet was a shining, blue-green ball—the earth.

Carefully, John placed the photograph in a large envelope and slid it, with the stone, into his coat's inner pocket.

"They'll believe now," he murmured. "They ignored the letters, the telegrams. Now, with proof, they'll believe. They'll learn what is a lie and what is the truth. They'll learn who was *really* first."

A moment later he was on the street, struggling to filter through the crowd. For a few seconds he knew terror, because those in the crowd had surrendered all individuality. They had become a single, automatic entity, hypnotized by the tapestry of colour and sound and responding to it alone. The crowd closed in upon him like the tentacles of an octopus, imprisoning him and thrusting him forward and back.

At last, panting, he broke free. He found a side street—one

that would not be invaded by the parade. He walked swiftly. Then, although breath came hard, he ran.

Carved above the entrance of the huge stone building were the words:

UNITED STATES BUREAU OF
INTERPLANETARY RESEARCH

John stopped to catch his breath. How many of his letters had passed over that mountainous series of steps? How many, like those to Congress, to the Pentagon and to the President, had been crumpled, torn, tossed into waste baskets?

It didn't matter. He was doing now what he should have done a month ago—appearing in person with his proof.

He lumbered up the stone steps. His watery eyes widened at the bright murals in the vast foyer—murals of stars and planets, of rockets and spacemen, all centred about a gigantic and symbolic pair of human hands reaching upward.

John squinted down the white, clean, cool halls.

So this was where spacemen of today lived, studied, worked, experimented. How different from that battered hut in the hot, wind-burnt New Mexican desert.

"May I help you, sir?"

The voice snapped him back to reality.

He turned and saw a young man seated at a desk a short distance away. The man was sleepy-eyed, with black, close-cropped hair and ears that were too big. On the desk was a placard that said: *Officer of The Day: Lieutenant Andrews.*

The lieutenant drummed his fingers on the desk. "Speak up, old timer. What is it? If you want information on today's flight, just help yourself to these folders."

"No, no." John walked up to the desk, brushed away the folders. "I—I want to see someone in authority. There's something I have to tell them."

"I'm in charge. Go ahead and tell it to me."

John trembled. "It's going to sound crazy. You might not believe—"

"Go ahead and tell it. Then I'll decide whether to believe."

Confidence came to John. He touched the reassuring bulge of the stone and the photograph in his pocket. Then he began to speak.

"Well, you've read how things were back in 1957. The world cut in half.* Communism on one side, Democracy on the other. Each

side threatening the other. Both building faster and faster jets and bigger and bigger H-bombs. People felt like they were walking on tight-ropes.

"Late in '57 the Russians announced that they had the biggest H-bomb ever made. The President and his cabinet and the top brass met. The Army Chief of Staff was already on record in saying there was no perfect defence against an H-bomb attack. Radar nets, anti-aircraft and fighter planes would take care of a lot of attacking bombers or missiles, but some would probably get through. There had to be something else—something as daring as the first A-bomb project back in World War II.

"The answer was obvious: a *manned* artificial satellite."

The lieutenant stiffened. He made a sucking noise with his lips.

"Yes," John continued, "a *manned* satellite. Our scientists had developed the tiny, unmanned 'mouse.' A full-scale version was tougher—but possible.

"And a nation in control of such a satellite would watch over all the world. From its near-zero gravity it could launch guided atomic missiles to any point on the earth."

John cleared his throat. His listener was still attentive.

"So Project Pandora began. Like the Manhattan Project, it was top secret, because we didn't want the Russians to start like crazy on their own Project. I never learned how many men were involved—probably about 100,000. But all except maybe a hundred or so thought they were working on new types of jets or fuels.

"A new town—Pandora City—sprang up in New Mexico for general research. Really top secret stuff, like the construction of our rockets, was handled in Hell Canyon, which probably still isn't on your maps. You couldn't get there except by cargo-carrying helicopter.

"I was a guided missile man transferred from Point Mugu to the Canyon. Entering that hell-hole was like being sentenced for life. We had our movies and beer, but the sun and mountains were still there. I used to look at those mountains and wonder if I dared try to escape. Then I thought of the desert on the other side. There *was* no escape—except through death or by finishing the damn project.

"By the fall of '58 we had our fuel. Dilute monatomic hydrogen—powerful as the guts of an H-bomb, but controllable, suitable for atomic engines. Powered with that fuel, a rocket could rip through the old seven-mile-a-second barrier like a knife cutting through tissue paper.

"Then a new question came up. Was the artificial satellite the ideal solution to our problem? Even at a height of a thousand miles,

it could be visible to Russian astronomers. Russian knowledge of our secret could start off a Third World War.

"We'd developed an alloy of rare earths for our jet tubes, so there was no reason why we couldn't hit the moon direct. A Lunar station could be camouflaged and launching platforms for missiles could be scattered. Most important, the moon would give us utter secrecy."

John's voice trailed. A cloud of memory seemed to drift before his vision. "And—and I guess there was something else, too. We didn't want to stop with just a satellite. We had the power to take space by the nose and pull it around like a whipped dog. The first men to leave our planet—think of those words. The first, the very first. The thought makes you a little drunk."

He smiled. "The President, his cabinet, the top brass okayed our ideas. So the moon it was! "

Lieutenant Andrews rose, his mouth a tight, white line.

"Afraid we'll have to call it a day," he muttered. "It's time for me to go off duty. Sorry."

"But—but your relief isn't here. You can't—"

"Sorry." The man's gaze avoided John's face.

He moved swiftly, his tall body easing around the desk, then striding down the hall.

John was like a statue, an absurd, bulging-eyed statue with right hand still raised in a climactic, melodramatic gesture.

"But I haven't finished!" he cried. "You haven't heard—"

The lieutenant marched away, oblivious to John's pleading voice. Abruptly, his bright uniform disappeared into one of the labyrinth's many rooms.

John was a fragile leaf mauled by winds of desperation. He dug furiously into his coat's inner pocket.

"You haven't seen my proof!" he screamed.

There was no reply save the cold, hollow, hundred-tongued echo of his own words.

John looked down at his outstretched hands. They were holding the faded photograph and the shining stone, offering them to the silence.

Outside, the city was like a merry-go-round whirling faster and faster. Music had swelled to a dizzying crescendo. Colours were

brighter in the noon sunlight. Voices were louder, prayers stronger . . .

"Ten to one they don't make it," said a rat-faced man. "I'll take *all* bets . . ."

"They will not be alone," the solemn man in the black robe intoned to his congregation. "For yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death . . ."

"Why must Daddy go up into the sky, Mama? Why?" asked the child.

"He's going to be a pioneer, dear. He's going to be one of the first to go to the moon."

"But why, Mama? Why?"

The bearded man shouted, "The wrath of God will fall upon us and upon our children and our children's children. Man was not meant—"

"We have our Marco Polo, our Columbus, our Wright Brothers and our Lindbergh. Now, by the grace of God, we have our George Everson!"

"Step right up, folks! Get your souvenir programmes here! And don't forget your dark glasses for the take-off. Special today—only one dollar!"

A clock struck one.

"No," said the stiffly polite girl, "the city editor isn't in. No, our reporters are covering the flight. Sorry."

A clock struck two.

"Sorry."

John sighed. What else was there? The Research Bureau. The Department of Defence, the Pentagon. *The Times*, *The Herald*, *The Post*. He hadn't wanted to take his story to the newspapers, but they had given him a last, futile hope. Now, even they had refused to listen.

There was still *The Mirror*. The twilight news. The love nests, the exposés, the screaming headlines that most papers were saving for the second coming of Christ.

John found himself walking up dark, thinly carpeted stairs, pushing a faded swinging door. Then someone was leading him forward. Sounds of clacking typewriters and rustling papers filled the air.

The photograph and the moon stone were in his hands. He was thrusting them forward.

"This is my proof," he mumbled automatically.

For a long time his surroundings were like the terrain in a dimly remembered dream. Then hands helped him into a chair.

A deep voice grunted at him. "Okay, proof of what?"

John blinked. His brain fought to break through the wall of weariness that enclosed it. He saw that the man before him was middle-aged, balding, small-eyed. His trace of a smile was not unpleasant.

"What's it all about, fellow?" the man asked, leaning back in his chair.

Thank you, God, thought John, *that I have another chance.*

He began again. 1957, the H-bomb, Project Pandora. Lord, if he could only show this man the images that still hung in his memory!

But how could you capture the dizzying blackness of space, the hypnotic silver of stars, and recreate their magic in mere words? How feeble were words. They were like broken fingers trying to carry sand.

Nevertheless, the man listened. John came to the words, "So the moon it was!" And even then the man said nothing. John went on:

"Our first rocket was ready by the summer of '59. We named it the *Marilyn*—after Marilyn Monroe, the top glamour gal of those days. And I was in the ship's first crew.

"Our take off wasn't like this circus today. No music, no speeches, no parades. We had a shot of brandy in the morning. We shook hands with our friends and puffed on cigarettes and the C.O. said a prayer. Then we took off."

John weighed words and memories in his mind. "It'd take me a year to tell about how space looks and how the moon is; and how you feel when all the things you love are in a cloud-wrapped ball 240,000 miles away. Or how it feels to see your buddies slip through the paper-thin crust that covers parts of the moon and go down into nothingness, just as if the hand of God wiped them out of the universe.

"Anyway, we hit the moon. The ship stayed long enough for us to build a dome. Then we split the crew in half. Five stayed, the rest shuttled back to Earth for more supplies. Three months later the second rocket, the *June Randy*, was ready, and life got a little easier. We began to get an occasional case of beer and mail from home. Our families thought they were writing to Pandora City. To think that those little three-cent letters would go all the way to Luna would have seemed a lunatic's dream to them.

"By the summer of '61 Project Pandora was completed. We had two domes and four launching stations, each a hundred miles apart. The missiles on the launching platforms were like those beds of nails

the yogis are supposed to lie on—only a hundred times bigger. And each nail was a uranium-lithium-tritium-headed rocket.

"1961 slipped by, and '62 and '63. There were a few aborted revolutions on Earth, a few moments of tension, but no war."

A veil of loneliness seemed to fall over his vision, separating him from his listener.

"Go ahead," the man prompted him.

"Well, new faces appeared in our crews. The older fellows were given memory-washes so they wouldn't start blabbing when they returned to Earth. Psychiatry was pretty primitive in those days. The treatment wasn't much more than hypnosis, creating an artificial psychic block in their minds. After a while, it seemed like men were coming and going like figures on a treadmill—but me, I stayed on."

"You stayed on? Why?"

John thought for an instant. "Because there were two kinds of loneliness for us. One was being on the moon, in silence and emptiness. The other was being on Earth, in the midst of life and knowing the biggest secret in the world and not being able to talk about it. And of the two kinds of loneliness, to me, the last was the worst. So I stayed on the *Marilyn*."

John tried to keep his voice calm, his manner confident.

"Then came the Russian Revolution of '74, the rise of democracy behind the crumbling Iron Curtain. The rest of the world watched and waited. We kept those launching platforms ready—just in case. But by '76, there was no doubt about it. Communism was over and done. The world was at peace.

"And with the arrival of peace, man's energies had to be directed into new channels. Till now, the government had quietly discouraged any talk about space flight. But now man craved adventure. Newspapers and public opinion began to beat the drum for that first flight to the moon."

He chuckled softly. "The President must have been tearing his hair out. What the hell was he going to do with Project Pandora? The Russians mustn't know that for fifteen years our missiles had been ready to blast them to eternity. The old hates had been buried. They couldn't be allowed to rise again."

"So Project Pandora became Project Garbage. The domes and platforms were dismantled and carried back to Pandora City. The moon was the biggest garbage dump in the Solar System, but it had to be cleaned up to the last beer can and cigarette butt. It had to become virgin again, ready to receive what Earth would later call the

first pioneers of space. And it was then, when discipline was low, that I smuggled out the moonstone and the photo.

"Everybody got the memory-wash—from the President on down. I was a civilian again with a nice pension. For the first couple of years I couldn't remember a thing. I only knew I'd done secret work for the government. I'd look at my photo and stone and wonder where I got them.

"But gradually my memory came back. Maybe it was because of the photo, or maybe because I'd been on Luna and the *Marilyn* so much longer than the others.

"Last year I got mad when Everson announced plans to hit the moon. His name was in headlines every day. He was becoming a hero without even leaving the ground. And there were a hundred men whose bodies were already lost on Luna. They were the real heroes, the real pioneers. This celebration today—it's a mockery. I want the world to know the truth."

For the space of a minute the small-eyed man was silent. His fingers toyed with the stone and the photograph.

Finally he murmured, "Suppose I publish your story. How much do you want for it?"

To John, the words were like April sunshine streaking into a cobwebbed winter attic.

"You—you want to use the story? You believe me?"

"I didn't say I believe it. I don't give a damn whether it's true or not. My job is to sell newspapers. I asked how much you want for it."

"Nothing," John said softly.

The small-eyed man grunted. "We could flood the city with the afternoon edition. People are buying anything with a moon angle. The Russians wouldn't shout for joy, but there shouldn't be any harm done at this late date."

His eyes brightened. "We might get away with it. We've got your stone. We could demand that Everson locate the place where you got it and either prove or disprove your story. Why, that'd be good for months!"

He laughed. "What a damper we'll put on *this* celebration! We'll make the city seem like a morgue. It's a dirty, lousy trick, but by God it'll sell papers!"

John leaned forward, squinting. "A dirty, lousy trick? What do you mean?"

"Skip it." The man's enthusiasm was rising. He was like fizzing soda in a thumb-stoppered, shaken bottle. "We got to get this story in print. Hey, Marty! Get the dicto-typer over here! I've been waiting all my life to yell stop those presses. Marty! *Stop those goddamn presses!*"

"What did you mean?" John insisted. "How can telling people the truth be a dirty, lousy trick?"

The small-eyed man laughed again. "You don't think folks'll *like* this story, do you? You don't think they'll feel like celebrating when they read this, do you? It's a cinch they won't start cheering *you* for what you did almost twenty years ago! Say, wait'll Everson sees that moon pic plastered on my front page. *There's* an angle! A pic of Everson's expression! Hey, Marty! Get me—"

Restlessly, John rose and shuffled to a window. One of the city's myriad parades, like a battalion of coloured ants, was streaming down the street.

The small-eyed man yelled, "Come on, let's have that story again! This time it's for publication."

John didn't answer. Odd thoughts were stirring in deep recesses of his mind.

"Come on! Let's have that story!"

John stared out the window, a far-away gaze in his eyes. "Do—do you suppose I was the only one who remembered? There must be others. I couldn't be the only one."

"Sure, there could be others—if your yarn is true. Maybe they've tried to tell and nobody believed 'em. Or maybe they're keeping quiet. Maybe they don't want to make dopes out of Everson and his men. Maybe they want to keep 'em heroes. Now, gimme that story!" He flicked a switch on the dicto-typer.

Words echoed in John's brain. *Maybe they don't want to make dopes out of Everson and his men. Maybe they want to keep 'em heroes*

It's a cinch they won't start cheering you for what you did almost twenty years ago.

The world has need of heroes, he thought. There's Luna, and then there are Venus and Mars and Jupiter and all the others; and, always, there are the stars. And, between, there are miles and years of darkness and loneliness, and courage is a candle flame too easily extinguished. Mankind will need songs of daring and tales of heroes and signposts to guide the way to infinity. You can't make heroes out of men whose very names are forgotten. You can't make heroes out of tired old bones.

John frowned as the hum of presses echoed in his ears.

The great headlines would descend upon the enchanted city like a black tidal wave. They would swirl through the streets, devour the bright colour, absorb the gay sound, suck the joy into dark waters of doubt and suspicion.

The small-eyed man was shouting at him. He did not hear.

After all, John told himself, this is for you. It's not for Everson and his men, really. It's for the pioneers, for those who dare to be first. The eyes are not on you, and the voices do not speak to you. Yet all this, really, is for you—for you were the first. Would you destroy this day that is yours?

A voice was swearing at him.

What a day it was! Why, it must be the greatest in the history of Earth. It was a day for all history books everywhere, always. It was a shame that the minutes were piling one upon the other so rapidly. How wonderful if they could be bottled and sealed like sweet perfume, to be dispensed slowly, a scent a month, a drop a year.

Hands were tugging at his arm. He shook himself free. He turned back to the desk, seized the moon-stone and the photograph, replaced them in his pocket.

Silently, head high, he strode past the naked, astonished faces.

Dusk. A silence blanketed the take-off field. The seconds hung in the air like bits of fire and ice.

Captain George Everson, the man with no legs, waved to the multitude as he entered his silver rocket.

Presently there was a sound of thunder, and the land trembled. Flame belched from the stern of the *Lunar Lady*. Slowly, the rocket began to rise. The multitude drew back, like frightened red ghosts in the fiery glare from the grumbling jets.

A greater avalanche of flame spewed from the rocket. A furnace-hot wind shrilled over the field, lashing at hair and clothing, at banner and flag.

And suddenly the *Lunar Lady* was gone. It was a needle of fire high in the twilight sky, a vanishing target for a million narrowed eyes.

A hushed, reverent murmur rose from the field.

A small girl in a pink party dress tugged at her mother's skirt.

"Look, Mommy," she whispered. "Look at that funny old man. He keeps saying, 'This is for you,' and he's crying and laughing at the same time!"

EDWARD LUDWIG

Chip on my Shoulder

*He was suffering from a complaint unknown to
medical science and alarming in its possibilities.*

Illustrated by Gerard Quinn

It started as a little stiffness in my left arm. Then the stiffness became localized in a pink swelling on the biceps. When the swelling got to look like I had a pigeon's egg tucked under my skin, I decided it was time I saw the company doctor.

He thought maybe it was fibrositis and prescribed a liniment. Just as I was leaving his surgery, he took off his glasses and waved them at me.

"I don't think it's compensatable," he said, pointedly. "I'm pretty sure it has no connection with the flight."

I wondered.

How could he possibly know? Nobody else had ever taken cosmic radiation in their birthday suit. Not at five hundred miles above the surface of the Earth, they hadn't.

Anyhow, I used the liniment, which didn't help the ache in my arm any but did raise a wicked-looking crop of watery blisters. I went back to the quack.

"Erythema," he pronounced. "The liniment does that to people with delicate skins. I'll give you something to soothe it."

"How about an X-ray?"

"Quite unnecessary." Like most doctors, he didn't like the patient suggesting his own treatment.

I made some dark remark about the company shelving its responsibilities after having its pound of flesh. He just reminded me that I had been well paid for what I did. Which left me with nothing better to say than a dirty word.

He was right, of course. I had been well paid. For standing sixty seconds with the screens down and my shirt off I got—well, how much I got is my business. It was a tidy sum.

Naturally, apart from the money, I earned some disapproval; that was from the official half of the space-going partnership.

When something as big as spaceflight looks like becoming a reality, you can bet your magnetic boots that Business will buy itself a share in the venture. And with the necessary finances as astronomi-

cal as the project, you can also bet that the government isn't going to be too proud to accept a handout from commercial interests.

I wasn't too proud either. It sounded like easy money. A particular cosmetic company figured it had a barrier cream that was proof against cosmic radiation. Would I, for a consideration, try it ?

All I had to do was annoint one side of my body with their goo and let down the shields for sixty seconds. If I came back fried on one side that meant the balm was effective. If I came back uncooked, that was all right too because then the company would know that cosmic rays are harmless and they could abandon their expensive research programme.

The flight was only a trial run, five hundred miles up and back. The exposure time was only a minute. I said I would oblige.

Except for two things, I could have had the money for free. I could have come back and said I had done my striptease act and nothing had happened. But if I do sometimes take money that isn't altogether untainted, I never welch on a deal. Besides, they had those blasted television cameras all over the ship.

The stiffness in my arm began a week after the trip. The connection seemed obvious to me. Even if my brief attempt at beef-cake hadn't left a mark on my skin, something had happened under the skin, something that made my arm ache and then swell.

Five weeks after the trip, I looked as if I was carrying a spare shoulder around with me. That's how big the lump on my arm had grown. And that is when the lump began to move.

Maybe you know somebody who has rheumatism or sciatica. If you do and you're the observant type, you will have noticed how they automatically rest the affected muscles by throwing extra work on some other part of the body. Then when they sit down, the over-taxed muscles start twitching.

I thought something like that was happening with me.

But when I thought a little longer and watched the swelling move some more, I changed my mind. The swelling wasn't a muscle for one thing. And it didn't twitch. It twisted and turned, twisted and turned. Exactly as if it was trying to make itself comfortable.

I did a lot of sweating the first day the lump moved. There was a fair amount of pain when the swelling twisted but it wasn't the pain that made me sweat. It was fear. Fear—plus the fact that the movements were involuntary. I couldn't stop the thing moving. I couldn't make it move when it was still.

And I should know. I spent the whole day trying.

The barrier was up when I went to the cosmetic company's doctor



next day. His secretary had been given orders about me. Evidently I wasn't the first one to try claiming compensation for an experiment that had gone wrong.

He wasn't in, she said. She didn't know where he had gone or when he would be back. It was possible that if he had been in he would also have been too busy to see me. She made no attempt to hide that she was lying. That's my story, her expression said; do what you like about it. I put my hand on her face and pushed her aside. I wasn't feeling very tolerant.

Inside the surgery, the doctor got off his seat as fast as if the managing director had walked in and caught him with his feet on the desk. I could see his attitude wasn't going to be friendly.

"Clyde," he said. "I hope you're not going to start any trouble. I've told you before that those epidermal sections showed no ill-effects due to cosmic rays."

Since he was setting the tone of the meeting, I matched it. I peeled off my coat.

"I didn't get that from walking into a door," I growled. "Take a look. Take a good long look."

"It's bigger," he admitted.

"Touch it. Feel it."

He circled his desk—away from me. "I've made my diagnosis once. I see no reason for changing it. Go home, Clyde. You've been paid off once. Don't try blackmailing the company. The company is a lot bigger than you."

Before he drew another breath I was round the desk and had a fistful of his shirt in my good hand.

"Touch it!"

There must have been something persuasive in my face. He ran his fingers up my arm, closed them round the swelling and squeezed.

The old Clyde nervous system went into action with a riot of conflicting messages to the brain. Such was the agony that blazed through my body that my head bounced down to my chest and for a moment there was blindness in my eyes and a moan in the sourness of my mouth. Then the reaction followed and my fist had lifted from the doctor's shirt just long enough to change direction and slam into his midriff.

Antagonism had nothing to do with the blow. It was the result of nervous reaction and nothing more. I told the doctor so as I dragged him to his feet.

"This time," I said, "just touch it. Lay your fingers on it lightly and tell me what you feel."

He wasn't looking so sure of himself now. He seemed afraid. He gave a pathetic glance at the buzzer on his desk and did as I told him. The buzzer was out of reach.

Whether or not the squeeze had deadened my arm, the fact remains that the swelling lay docile. As the seconds passed, I could see the doctor regaining his composure. I could even guess that he was considering what I would do if he shouted for help.

Without warning, the lump on my biceps did its stuff. It was almost worth the return of the sickening fear to see the quack's expression.

"Strip," he said, when his chin came up and he was able to speak. "Whatever it is, I'm going to cut."

He was being so genuinely professional, I knew he wouldn't change his mind and have me thrown out.

A couple of minutes later, my arm had been sprayed with a freeze-gun and he was selecting a scalpel. He poised the instrument above the swelling so long you would have thought it was his arm that was going to be cut.

"Get it over with," I grunted. Somebody had to break up the reluctance that had us fixed in tableau.

Clear fluid vomited over the lips of the incision. The quack swabbed the cut dry. The first streaks of red showed on the gauze. The swelling was very little less in size and the scalpel was descending for a transverse cut when I felt a twisting movement coming.

"Hold it!"

We waited. Occasionally, the doctor dabbed at the wound to keep the field of vision clear. Apart from that he didn't interfere.

Inside the wound, I felt that twisting sensation as if the lump was contracting itself for the more violent action that usually followed. I had gone through the experience so often since the previous day that I was ready for the next convulsion when it came. The lips of the incision parted. Out of the mouth came a tongue.

My stomach heaved and the wound was suddenly rushing at me as if to engulf me. Far away, the doctor was urging me to take deep breaths. I didn't quite faint. Not even when two more pink tendrils crawled out of my arm and the weaving excrescence stood swaying on a fourth one rooted in my flesh.

The quack turned out to be a man of mercy. He turned his back on me, tucked my left arm under his, and with my vision blocked, did something that sent me sagging at the knees. When he moulded me into the shape of his chair, the lump on my arm was gone.

I kept my eyes off the gauze-wrapped bundle on his desk.

He gave me a cigarette and lit one for himself. I think we both needed that smoke.

"Clyde," he said softly. "How tough are you?"

"Let's hear it."

"Are you sure you want to hear it?"

"I'm sure."

"You can have your compensation," he said. There was pity in his voice. I drew the rest of the picture for myself.

"If I live to collect. Is that it?"

"Possibly. Did you know that nearly everybody is a twin?"

That came too suddenly for me to grasp. I said I didn't know and let him tell me.

Actually he had said it all in one sentence but he had to elaborate for my benefit. In nearly every human being there are dormant cells which have never matured to their full development. These cells constitute a twin to the host, sometimes triplets, quadruplets and theoretically any number of other selves.

There are authenticated cases where these dormant cells have slowly matured over the years, and middle-aged men admitted to hospital with suspected tumours have been relieved of growths

weighing several pounds and just recognisable as human. The tumours were dormant twins. Generally, the instances of dormant twins are less dramatic in their manifestation. In most cases, the growths are little more than penny-sized cysts.

"That," said the company doctor, "is what happens on Earth where the full effect of cosmic rays is not felt. Whether these rays are encouraging or deterrent to life has always been a debatable point. I think the argument is settled now."

The implications seeped into me. I quizzed him for more facts.

"So your opinion is that any cells dormant in me have been vitalised intensely by exposure to cosmic radiation?"

"There are not many other possibilities to pick from."

"Try me with one."

The doctor shrugged—as if I was dead and the words on the certificate didn't matter much.

"What is life?" he said. "Where does it originate? It could be that what we call cosmic radiation is simply a ceaseless flow of life, an endless outpouring of the seeds of life. When they hit suitable ground, such as Earth, they sprout and we have life. Anywhere in the universe, anywhere with the right conditions could be a seed-bed."

I forgot my own predicament. "In that case, we can expect to find life somewhere out there when we get there?"

He handed me another cigarette. "I was only theorising."

After some consideration, I agreed. "I like the first suggestion better. If the second one was correct, cosmic radiation would be a proper seed-mixture. It would contain the life-spores of everything from bacteria to ants and mastodons. And the unknown things that may be out there on Proxima."

A well-manicured hand patted my knee. "If it's any consolation," the doctor said, "that twin of yours was human."

But I had seen and I knew he missed out the *almost*. He was still lying when he went on: "In all likelihood, there was only one dormant cell. With the compensation I'm going to recommend, you should take a trip, get out to some island where the world still turns slow and try to forget what you saw today."

That was his advice and I took it. But it isn't so easy to forget.

The first dormant cell turned up in my left arm. Since then I've had two more out of my left leg and one from my hip.

What worries me is the new swelling that is developing on my scalp, a couple of inches above my left ear.

ROBERT PRESSLIE

Act of Aggression

*Misunderstandings are bound to arise between alien
races sometimes with fatal consequences*

When the diplomatic ship *Freedom* landed on Dalann, hopes were high on board. The Dalannians, according to the reports of the pioneers Park and McCallum who had initially landed there some eight Earth-years before, were small, friendly, democratic, slightly telepathic and extremely co-operative. They were also the possessors of a technology that lagged a mere century and a half behind that of Earth—they had already colonised their satellites, consisting of two moons and a dozen assorted planets—and were rapidly reaching the stage when interstellar flight was a mere decade or so away.

They also had a far-reaching reputation for warring amongst themselves, a habit which had resulted inevitably in their development of many formidable weapons.

It was this latter proof of civilised technological advancement that was the chief cause for rejoicing among the delegation carried by the *Freedom*. Their recently terminated contacts with the Kloof, the Lotipac, and the Weem had proved disappointing in the extreme. Without exception they had proved to be lethargically and habitually peaceful and determined to stay that way. The Dalannians were a very different prospect. Any race that actually seemed to enjoy fighting, and had got to the stage where they were in a position to heave cobalt bombs at one another had all the necessary qualifications for an ally. Provided, of course, that they could be persuaded that it would be to their ultimate advantage to join in the Earth-Vegan war.

Espadaptors were tuned to the correct frequency, courteous greetings were exchanged, and top-level meetings were arranged immediately.

They took place in the open—the Dalannian buildings proved, as predicted, too small for the ungainly bulk of the Terrans—and were conducted along the friendliest possible lines, commencing with an hour's concert by the massed brass bands of the local military academy.

The average Dalannian was about three feet tall, and his instruments were correspondingly cut to size. The high-pitched rasping that resulted was pure burlesque and somewhat nerve-grinding. The delegation stoically maintained poker-faces throughout the event, with the exception of the Australian representative, who disappeared behind his handkerchief at explosively regular intervals.

An exchange of gifts followed the roundly applauded entertainment, after which the chief delegate rose to state the reason for their visit. This was done with the utmost tact, involving an inordinate amount of praise for the people of Dalann as a whole, with special reference to their mutual love of democracy and the freedom that was an integral part of such a system. The Dalannians cheered. He followed this favourable indication with a fervent appeal for their military aid in the death-struggle that was at that very moment rending the heavens of his own beloved planet, resulting in the slaughter of untold millions and threatening the very foundations of the system of government that was so precious to them all. He took great care to mention that they already had the full co-operation of the Glems and the Fibroff, whose feelings towards democracy were similar to their own. Mention was also made of the technical knowledge that Earth was prepared to share to enable the Dalannians to participate in the conflict. A full understanding of the technicalities of interstellar flight would be necessary before they could be counted as fully-fledged allies in this desperately vital struggle for freedom. Naturally, once the struggle was over, the knowledge given to them by a grateful Earth would be theirs to keep, to use as they willed in their own exploration of the wonders of the universe. The delegate finished on a sober note, pointing out that should Earth and her present allies be beaten, there was always the strong possibility that the Vegans would one day come blasting their way through the Dalannians' own system, pillaging and plundering as they came, continuing their as yet unchecked occupation of every solar-system that stood in their path. The Dalannians, he knew, said the chief-delegate gratefully, would not stand by in freedom's hour of need.

He sat down, terminating a fine performance.

There was a short, embarrassed silence before the Dalannian President replied.

When he did, his remarks were couched in the most apologetic terms.

He thanked the Earth delegation for their visit, and expressed the humble pride that he and his people felt at being considered worthy allies in such a vitally necessary cause. There was, he knew, nothing

that would have given them greater satisfaction than to participate in such a noble struggle, but unfortunately it was at present impossible. The truth of the matter was, the President explained regretfully, the Dalannians themselves were at present fully occupied in preparing for a fracas of their own, involving their own planet and its colonized satellites. The colonies had been clamouring for independence ever since they had found that their new homes were capable of supporting them unaided. The Dalannian government had naturally resented this ungrateful attitude and had immediately pointed out that were it not for their own efforts and the colossal expenditure involved there wouldn't have been any colonies in the first place. The forthcoming replies had been insulting in the extreme. Diplomatic relations had been severed some months previously when it was learned that the colonists were manufacturing bombs and the necessary warships to carry them. The result of all this, the President informed them sadly, was that hostilities were expected to break out at any time. In such a position, he was forced to regretfully decline their extremely generous offer, one for which he and his people would be forever grateful, and merely wish them good fortune in their endeavours. Another time, perhaps.

The delegation from Earth was too stunned to reply immediately.

They returned to the *Freedom*, accompanied by the energetically tooting musicians, to consider this unexpected and extremely unwelcome turn of events.

"And what," queried the chief-delegate, puffing angrily on a long and grossly expensive Havana, "do we do now?"

The delegation was seated gloomily in the main cabin, following the downing of a five-course dinner that had been received in a morosely unappreciative silence. Heads were now shaken, shoulders lifted and dropped, while those members of the party that possessed a Latin strain spread their hands expressively.

"Nothing," said the chief-delegate, disgustedly. He looked spikily around the table, and prodded a forefinger at his second-in-command. "What do you say, Milton?"

Milton bit his lip, ducked his head sideways, and looked plaintive.

"Not a thing we can do, chief. If they've got a war of their own, then they've got one. Besides, they know damned well that if the Vegans ever do get out this far, it won't be for quite a while. Don't forget, we're a long way from home out here and at the moment we're holding them back pretty well. Once we get the Glems and the Fibroff properly organised, our chances are even better. We

can hold them, and these people are smart enough to see that. They know there's a darned good chance we might even lick the Vegans, in which case they'll never have to turn out at all. Besides, they're pretty close to interstellar flight off their own bat. Why should they pay the price they know is inevitable when they can have a cosy little interplanetary war of their own that will cost them a fraction of the amount in men and material?" He pulled at his chin, dubiously. "The way I see it, the best thing we can do is push on and contact the Freeby on Freeb III. On paper they don't look as promising as this crowd, but there's always the chance that they aren't internally occupied, so to speak."

There was a general nodding of heads around the table.

"I guess," said the chief-delegate, heavily, "you're right." He pushed his chair back and rose. "The Government isn't going to like it. With a war-happy bunch of sawn-off runts like this behind us we could tie Vegans up in half the time it'll take." He sucked gloomily on his cigar. "Too bad. I'll have another smack at them before we leave, but like you say, I think they're smart enough to see which side of their bread really carries the butter."

A further meeting was arranged and held, but the result was the same. The Dalannian President once more expressed his mortification at their present inability to participate in what promised to be a most enjoyable and worthwhile conflict, but internal affairs must take precedence. Once more he wished them good fortune, and hoped that it would not be too long before their two races were able to meet again, perhaps in more peaceful times.

The chief delegate replied that he found this latter sentiment very much to the taste of his own party. He thanked the President for the hospitality that had been shown, and expressed the wish that very soon the inhabitants of Earth would be able to repay them in a fitting manner.

Their visit terminated with a full-scale parade back to the *Freedom* complete with ranks of minute marching troops and the inevitable tinnily hooting brass band.

The *Freedom* was two hundred miles above the planet when the first of the colonists' missiles landed below.

"And I hope," said the chief-delegate, uncharitably, "their silly little planet gets blown back into atoms."

It didn't, which was rather a pity in the long run.

History now records that it took eighty-three years to finally beat the Vegans. The Terrans, Glems, and Fibroff went it alone—the

Freeby had pleaded planet-wide famine when approached by the delegation—and consequently, the pooled resources of the allies were strained to the utmost limit at the termination of hostilities.

Prompt action had to be taken. Before, the Terrans had ventured beyond the confines of their own system seeking military aid. Now seemed to be the time for a similar expedition, only this time slanted at help along more economic lines.

The records of early interstellar travel were unearthed and methodically checked for possible sympathisers. The total was promising. While the Kloof, the Lotipac and the Weem had disinterestedly refused the earlier request of the allies, it seemed plausible that help would not be denied under the present set of circumstances. After all, while they didn't own a bomb between them, they mutually maintained a remarkably high standard of social conditions.

Much had been learned on that first, seemingly unfruitful voyage of the *Freedom*, that now proved invaluable to the Department of Interstellar Public Relations. A *modus operandi* was hastily completed and a rough draft submitted to the Government. The Government, following a brief perusal of the scheme, called a meeting so that certain rather odd points included in the submitted plan could be clarified.

The meeting convened, the P.R. delegation settled smugly back in their chairs, and their spokesman rose to address the Senate.

A once mighty power, now whittled down to eight battered hulks, said the spokesman, would be their theme. And yet, despite this crippling disadvantage, Earth and her allies were bringing their pitiful best as a token of everlasting friendship and respect. Two of the ships would be loaded with government surplus disposable ultra-hygienic foam-tissue mattresses, a gift for the Kloof who spent twenty hours of their thirty-one hour day sleeping. Two more would carry five-thousand drums of alka-seltzer for the notoriously stomach-troubled Lotipations. Worcester sauce had proved a remarkably popular beverage among the Weem when introduced by the passengers and crew of the *Freedom*. A gift of eight-thousand gallons of this potent refresher would be the cargo of two more of the ships. As for the Dalannians, knowing their one pet weakness apart from military hostilities, what more fitting gift could be supplied than a full-sized military band, to be based permanently on Dalann and placed at the Dalannians' complete disposal? This ingenuous approach was elaborated on at some length. He was convinced, the P.R. spokesman finally concluded, that when Earth and her allies humbly but proudly presented themselves and their gifts before these philanthropic races, there would be no hesitation whatever in their immediate proffering of the hand of salvation

to a friend so desperately in need.

The inclusion of the Dalannians on the list had been a last-minute affair. However, someone had been astute enough to point out that while the social conditions of the Kloof, the Lotipac and the Weem had been remarkably stable at the time of the *Freedom's* visit, it had taken place eighty-three years before. A lot could have happened in that time. The possibilities of drought, famine, plague, social upheaval—although the latter was extremely unlikely—could not be ignored. Also, technologically speaking, they were a little retarded. The Dalannians, on the other hand, were a comparatively advanced species. It was always possible that their internal bickerings had reached an early settlement and that interstellar travel was already established. Should this prove to be the case, a fleet of interstellar ships would be an invaluable asset to the allies' plans for economic recovery.

Speeches were made, the public cheered, and the expedition took off.

Hopes for an early and successful return were soon dashed. The expedition landed on Kloof I to find a savagely primitive civil war going full-blast. Sufficient contact was made with the natives to establish the cause of this violent about-face of the previously peace-loving population.

Famine was the answer. Some eighty years previously—just, as a point of interest, said their informant, after their own previous visit—a strange insect had made its initial appearance, a tragic event which had resulted in the complete ruination of their sko-root crops, thereby destroying the staple diet of the population and creating a build-up of internal tension which had finally exploded into a bitterly necessary war.

He dived a hand into his pouch—the Kloof were revoltingly marsupial—and produced a small metal container. He lifted the lid, the teeth of his twin mouths bared in a double grimace of hatred, and gestured at its contents.

"The evil one," he said, in unison. With one mouth he spat, with the other he leered frightfully. "The destroyer of our food and thus our families." He spat again.

The delegation peered at the contents of the tin, swallowed numbly, expressed their mumbled apologies for their unfortunately timed intrusion, retired hastily back into their ships, and beat a hasty retreat.

"Now how the devil do you suppose," queried the youngest member of the delegation, who had been absent from the meeting,

"a Colorado beetle found its way to a place like Kloof?"

A score of blackly smouldering looks was all that was forthcoming in the way of an answer to his query.

"Oh," said the youngest delegate, limply, and retired to his cabin for the remainder of the journey to Lotipac.

Immediately they landed, they found themselves clapped in quarantine. The green and gangling Lotipations worked their way mournfully through the ships, inoculating as they went. Plague, they informed the expedition, was rife on the planet. A strange new disease had mysteriously appeared three-quarters of a century before, a terrible, killing virus that had so far destroyed half the population and had caused the complete collapse of their economic structure.

A member of the expedition's medical staff made it his business to run a brief test. He submitted his findings to the chief-delegate.

"Mumps," said the chief-delegate, hollowly.

He issued hurried orders. The moment that the Lotipations were clear of the ships, the expedition blasted off.

They entered the atmosphere of Weem, fearful of what they might find. They weren't even given a chance to find out. Multitudinous pin-points of light commenced flashing on the planet below and they found themselves in the middle of a vicious barrage from what appeared to be well-armed ground forces. Squadrons of intercepting saucers were seen approaching rapidly. The expedition wasn't equipped for fighting. It switched hastily back to interstellar-drive and made a hurriedly undignified exit, leaving two of its ships spiralling slowly groundwards, black smoke trailing sluggishly behind them.

"And what in heaven's name do you suppose *that* was all about?" the chief-delegate asked his second-in-command, shakily.

His second-in-command shuddered. His complexion was pea-green and his eyes had a furtive, hunted look.

"Frankly, I daren't even think about it."

"Me neither," said the chief-delegate, displaying the incorruptible streak of honesty that had elevated him to his present position of trust. He pushed a hand tiredly through rapidly whitening hair. "What now? Dalann?" He shuddered. "My Uncle Leverett was one of the last crowd that called there. Sawn-off squirts with a taste for tin-whistle music, was what he called them. Didn't trust them, either. He had a theory that they faked that missile explosion just as our crowd was leaving. He figured this war of theirs was just a great big bluff, just an excuse to keep out of our troubles. I must confess the timing was oddly coincidental."

"Something to impress the tourists, so to speak."

"That's about it," said the chief-delegate. "In which case it's a little difficult to anticipate what sort of a reception we're in for." He sighed. "Anyway, they're our last hope. And there's only one way to find out."

Orders were issued. Wearily, the remaining half-dozen ships aimed themselves towards the Dalannian system.

"I have to confess," the chief-delegate said, gloomily, "that this isn't the first of Uncle Leverett's theories to go up in smoke."

The planet beneath them had undoubtedly seen conflict. The area visible was a blackened caricature of the corresponding scene in their colour-photo files. Here and there fresh patches of vegetation were appearing, but they were small and few.

Dispiritedly, the fleet cruised on, slowly surveying the remainder.

A pleasant surprise awaited them on the far side of the planet. There were still traces of conflict, but they were far fewer and already surrounded by vegetation. Small towns and villages were soon seen. The members of the expedition heaved uniformly explosive sighs of relief.

"Well, now," said the chief-delegate. He mopped his brow with a white silk handkerchief. "Praise the Lord for that! That's our last chance down there, gentlemen. Admittedly they look as if they've had troubles of their own, but at least *they're* responsible for them." He gazed thankfully at the slowly spinning world beneath them. "And while they don't look as healthy as they might, at least they're in considerably better shape than we are."

He communicated with the pilot-ship.

"Find the largest town that you can, a city if they have any left. Land close by, but take darned good care it's well away from the crops. We don't want to antagonise anybody before we get a chance to communicate."

The fleet cruised on, searching. Half-an-hour later, the inter-fleet communications light flickered in the chief-delegate's quarters.

"Well?"

"Just what we want, sir, by the look of it. A small city in a valley, covering about four square miles. No visible sign of bomb damage—they've probably built it since the end of the war. There's a strip of uncultivated ground about a mile to the west that ought to do O.K. for a landing field." There was a pause. "One small question mark. They don't reply to our radio signals. As a matter of fact, there's no sign of any radio activity of any sort down there."

"Why would that be?"

"Difficult to say. No people, possibly, but that seems a little odd considering the state of the land. There again, they're supposed to be slightly telepathic. Maybe they're developed it to such an extent they've rendered radio obsolete. It's been done before. What do you say, sir? Shall we give it a whirl?"

"Considering how far we've travelled, and having witnessed the rapid whittling down of possible saviours," said the chief-delegate heavily, "we're in no position *not* to give it a whirl. Set 'em down." He switched off and communicated with his staff.

"Say a large prayer, gentlemen. If they don't start shooting in the next ten minutes, we may be in business."

The landing was made without incident. Crew-members ventured outside into the pleasant sunshine, wandered around for a short time, and reported back. Nothing seemed to be amiss, apart from a total absence of the population.

"Nothing to worry about," said the chief-delegate. He spoke with a somewhat hunted heartiness. "They're just being cagey. A pretty obvious precaution when you're in the process of recovering from a war."

"Judging by the state of the land and that city over there, they've had plenty of time to do that," said his second-in-command, cautiously. "It must have taken them quite a while to lick the countryside back into its present shape." He coughed. "Don't you think it likely that they're keeping out of our way because they're considering us as possible invaders? After all, they did turn us down last . . ."

"Nonsense!" snapped the chief-delegate. "Nonsense! If they were considering us in the role of marauder, they'd have taken some sort of direct action by now." He glanced around, a little furtively, then waved an arm expansively. "Not a thing in sight except fine open country and that town over there." He inhaled deeply. "By Heaven, it's good to breathe fresh air again!" He clapped his junior explosively on the back. "My boy, you mustn't let your twelve years in the arena warp your viewpoint of the processes of the mind, human or otherwise. I guarantee that when we contact these people and the reasons for our visit are made known, the hand that was unfortunately otherwise occupied on the occasion of our last visit will be proffered gratefully. Brothers in adversity, that's what we'll be, mark my words." He oozed fellow-feeling. "Haven't we saved them from possible invasion? And just wait 'til they see the

lengths we've gone to to show them how sincerely their past hospitality was appreciated!" He took another deep breath, and a final look around. "Well, now. The sooner we get everything lined up and ready to move, the sooner we can expect some action."

Flurries of orders were issued. The personnel of the United Worlds' Expedition of Peace and Goodwill Brass Band were removed from the deep-freeze and re-activated. A tuba-player, suffering from a severe case of frost-bitten lip left them a man short, but the remainder presented a brave show as they assembled briskly in the nearby roadway. Sunlight twinkled brightly on polished instruments and buttons. The delegation, mounted in turbo-cars, lined up behind them, each member clutching a bouquet fresh from the refrigerators. The United Worlds' flag was hoisted. A sharp order was barked.

The column swept forward towards the city. No-one appeared as they approached the outskirts. A halt was called.

"Odd, I have to confess," said the chief-delegate, uneasily. He frowningly studied the nearby buildings through field-glasses. "If they're just being cautious, they're certainly playing it pretty close to the vest. Surely we've been recognised? I don't."

"Another odd thing," said his second-in-command. "Have you noticed how quiet it is?"

"Quiet?"

"Not a peep of any kind. No birds singing, no cattle hollering. But they're going through the motions. Look."

He pointed. A row of minute, sparrow-like birds observed them solemnly from their perch on a tree branch. At intervals they threw their heads back and went through a pantomime of gargling. In a field to their left small bison-like cattle grazed. Occasionally they lifted their heads, opened their mouths, appeared to exhale deeply, then continued grazing.

"Just like the video when the sound goes blooey," said the second-in-command, thoughtfully.

"An interesting comparison," said the chief-delegate frostily, "but hardly relevant. We came to communicate with the people, not the livestock." Despite his tone he was sweating more than the weather demanded. He took a last look at the buildings ahead, then turned to the O.C. "We've hung around here long enough. Get your men lined up and let's get moving. The sooner we make an actual contact, the sooner we can get down to business."

The column reassembled. The delegation brushed the dust from their clothes, vainly attempted to revive their already wilting flowers, and remounted the cars.

Briskly, they moved towards the city.

The sounds of their own progress was all that greeted them as they marched smartly between the buildings. The delegation peered around them, hopefully. Nothing stirred. No sign of life was visible, just the buildings and the narrow, empty strip of asphalt that stretched in a rigidly straight line through the centre of the city.

The chief-delegate cleared his throat, nervously.

"Well, there's only one thing for it." Despite his outward panache, he spoke in a hoarsely furtive whisper. "We'll have to try our trump card." He momentarily brightened. "When they hear a real man-sized brass-band they'll come popping out into the open like so many rabbits out of a hat. If there's one thing this crowd goes for, it's a load of tooting trumpets and trombones."

"We only have your Uncle Leverett's word for that," said his second-in-command, nervously. He was a little pale.

The chief delegate ignored him. Stiffly, he snapped an order.

The musicians raised their instruments to their lips, heaved in lungfuls of air, and blew.

The opening bars of the specially composed "Dalannian March" blasted brassily from the bells of the instruments. Drums thundered. A deafening ocean of sound boomed between the buildings, bounced lumberingly from wall to wall, pulverizing the air with a million alien vibrations.

The small thin windows of the small thinly walled buildings, logically enough, shattered.

From the hills on either side of the city, burning rays lanced viciously down on the marching men and machines.

Seconds later, a carpet of grey ash settled limply on the streets, stirred by a pleasantly warm breeze.

The minute Dalannians came down to the city from their posts in the hills. They grouped silently by the carpet of ash, stirred it with their feet, and thought among themselves. Some faces were bitter and angry, others cheerfully triumphant.

The heads of Government were hastily assembled. Gravely, the President rose to address them.

It was clear, said the President, that their long-founded fears had at last come to pass. Embittered by the refusal of their ancestors to join them in their war against the Vegans, the men of Earth had at last shown themselves in their true colours.

Assuming the Dalannians to have been irreparably crippled during their own internal conflict, Earth, now that her own battles had been won, had descended on them like an avenging snibbl, ready to pillage what remained of their once mighty world. In this, said the President, at the same time permitting himself a dryly sardonic smile, they had been guilty of an error in their assumptions. While Dalann itself was still nursing its wounds, the at-last united people of her worlds had been rapidly growing in strength. Cured at last—and at what a price! the President reminded them, soberly—of their long-established habit of warring among themselves, the people were now bound in fierce loyalty to protect themselves and their planets against aggressors such as these.

Fists were jubilantly shaken at the ceiling. Heads nodded in silent approval.

While it was true that a mere handful of vessels had been used in the original sortie, these plainly constituted something in the nature of raider-scouts, sent ahead to reconnoitre and survey the state of the Dalannians' plight. How fortunate for themselves that they had seen fit to remain under cover until the invaders' intentions had been made abundantly clear! Once reports had been radioed back to Earth, the main body of the marauders' fleet would have been despatched to occupy and ravage their presumably helpless planets. But now, thanks to their own astute handling of this perilous situation, the advantage had been wrested from the enemy. While the warmongers of Earth hesitated, waiting impatiently for confirmation of their ill-founded beliefs, the Dalannians, seizing their tactically gained opportunity, would attack in strength, a surprise blow that would effectively cripple Earth's potential as an aggressor. In the present situation, their at-last developed interstellar-drive was a godsend. Without it they would have been at the mercy of these insanely vengeful people, helpless to protect themselves against this absurdly unwarranted attack, but now—once more the President allowed the dryly sardonic smile to flicker across his features—the boot was indeed on the other foot. While they had solemnly sworn never again to indulge in warfare among themselves, this attack, utterly devoid of logical provocation and aimed at destroying their very existence could, and would not, go unanswered.

The Government members, meticulously blocking their personal jubilation at this Heaven-sent opportunity to resume their favourite pastime without smirching their code of honour, rose and applauded with silent solemnity.

A fleet of five-hundred interstellar vessels, hastily adapted for

war and carrying the very latest in zendubium bombs, blasted off for Earth.

Large crowds witnessed their departure in jubilantly frenzied silence.

An old one stood among them, supported by a youth whose face carried a look of grim elation.

The old one mused, "And now we shall never really know—whether these people returned to ravage us for denying them help in the far-off days of my youth, or whether some other purpose called them from their home beyond the Great Outside. ."

The youth scowled at him impatiently. Sharply, he sent, "But you *saw* what they would do—how they strutted their hulking bodies through our city, wantonly destroying as they went, arrogant in their assumed knowledge that we were a crippled people, unable to retaliate with strength .! The ground was made to tremble with their destructive might. Is that not enough—to know that they came to destroy. ?"

The old one looked dubious. He stroked his beard with gnarled fingers.

"Perhaps. Yes, perhaps." They turned away with the crowd as the ships vanished from sight. "And yet there was something about their weapons that was oddly—familiar. In form, there was a cumbrous affinity between the instruments on which our fathers used to make the Sounds of Rejoicing and Entertainment in the times before the Final War and the Afflictions that followed as punishment for us all. ."

He pursed his long-silent mouth, and scratched pensively at the lobe of one of his purely decorative ears.

ROBERT J. TILLEY

BACK NUMBERS

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There's No Business

The cinemas and TV studios had been destroyed, their business made illegal and society had once again to find its own amusements.

Illustrated by Harry Turner

The emaciated, silver-haired man in paper shoes and threadbare coat raised his begging cup against the wind torn rain. It slopped with water. Benjamin Russell tossed in a wadded banknote and then paused.

"You're Alfonso Gregory. Used to be the best wide-screen tri-di man in the business."

The beggar's fingers fumbled the note.

"Not me. Not me, mister." He was grey with fear. "Nothing to do with films. You mean somebody else."

He hunched himself together and sidled off into evening drizzle. Past the first lamp standard his back shone with rain.

Benjamin Russell stared after him, mildly shocked at the filthy word the beggar had used, decided that it took all kinds to make a world and sprang up the steps of Freda Markham's town house. The door robot admitted him to the hall where he shucked his plastic cloak

and slicked his dark hair back before the mirror. Freda's coloratura assaulted his ears and he winced; then he glanced around guiltily. The ornate, plushy luxury of the hallway seemed to give him back his stare with interest.

He chuckled harshly and immediately a wall-speaker hushed him in a cathedral whisper. He crept to the flung open double doors and stood leanly against the white plastic, looking into the drawing room beyond.

Freda was singing.

Deliberately, he forced himself to listen and appear delighted with the performance. Freda Markham had a tall, thinly scraggy neck and her Adam's apple bobbed like a yo-yo. Her eyes had been tactfully described as being 'soulful'. The rest of her would have made a grade A clothes-prop.

The sounds she was emitting made Russell's tooth stoppings ache.

Some one blundered into the hall to his rear, making enough noise to activate the cells of the wall-speaker which immediately issued its sepulchral hushing whisper. The sounds died. Rain drops tinkled under the cloak-rack.

Russell did not turn his head. Whilst Freda was singing, that would have been unforgivable bad manners. And there was too much at stake to risk it on a stupid gaffe like that. He smiled with pleasure, aping the others in the room.

He wondered, not without a touch of cynicism, how many of them contrived the pleasure at Freda's singing at the same cost of self-respect and adulteration of artistic taste as did he. Plenty of them, he judged, when Lily Wortley was playing the harp this evening not two hundred yards along the street. And right next door Brian Stammers was giving an amusing show of card tricks and legerdemain.

All over town people were gathering in conversation groups, folk-dancing sets, home handicraft classes, playing cards, ludo and tombola and joining lustily in good old eight to the beat singsongs. The dancehalls would be jumping. And, inevitably, in some darkened cellar a bunch of thrill-seeking youngsters would be watching an illicit Western or wide-screen epic running raggedly on one projector so the tri-di effect nagged at the eyes.

Folk-entertainment was keeping the country running on oiled wheels. That thought brought an amused awareness of the way his mind played with the word 'mass' and dropped it before it could link up and form an obscene expression.

At least, he was thinking as Freda smiled and the room exploded into clapping, obscene only to the blinkered.

"Wonderful, Freda my dear!" That was Colonel Hervey, looking shrivelled in civilian clothes. A powerful man, high in the ranks of Entpol.

Julius Strangeman, his head bobbing like a tansured orange, was picking a careful path between flattery to Freda and flattery to his secretary, a long-legged red-head. The secretary gag still held good, even though the office side of her work had been rendered redundant by automation.

"Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!" Freda was gushing, two spots of colour showing as though she had been dabbed on each cheek by a red paint brush. "You are all too kind."

"Not at all, Freda," said Russell, walking forward and taking her hand. "You were superb."

She angled her eyes at him. Their soulful depth made them look like puddles of sour milk. "You're so good to me, Benjamin." She turned on Mrs. Hervey. "Don't you think so, Clara?"

"Of course not, Freda. When a person owns twenty factories producing musical instrument and games, how can you be too good to them?"

"I am lucky, aren't I, Clara?"

Freda smiled around and passed a languid hand across her brows. "Drinks, everyone!" she called and the talk drifted across to the buffet. Freda drew Russell aside.

"That old cat Clara! Jealous as hell! If it wasn't for the colonel being in Entpol she'd still be scrubbing the floor of the Roxy Temple."

Russell forced himself into the mould of the gay young man about town. "You are lucky, you know, Freda. My few shares in your companies just about keep me alive. But, then, perhaps I don't deserve to be as fortunate as you. God's gift to song, Freda!"

She smiled at him and he had to turn away and fetch two glasses. He felt sorry for her; angry with himself for his part in this sorry scheme rather than nauseated with her. She couldn't help herself.

"I thought I saw Alfonso Gregory as I came in," he said, handing her a glass. "But I could have been mistaken."

"You must have been, Benjamin. He dropped out of circulation when Entpol took over. I heard that he lost a cool six million. Of course, his wife left him."

"He did. And she did. This beggar I saw was scared silly. Soon as I mentioned—" Russell glanced over his shoulder, then finished in a lower tone—"films."

"Benjamin!" Freda's colour rose and she lowered her eyelids

demurely. Russell wanted suddenly to shake her thin shoulders and shout at her to stop playing at being a woman and be one. Instead, he said: "Freda, dear, now that we're partners, that sort of thing shouldn't worry you."

"It's the way I was brought up, Benjamin. I was only ten when entertainment was rationalised; I believe in what you stand for but people like Colonel Hervey have controlled my thinking for the last eighteen years."

At least, Freda wasn't artificially coy about her age. "Of course. But entertainment, real art, I mean and not the pap dished out currently, is stifled by that same teaching. As a woman, you need the release of art and as a sensitive spirit, you demand the delight of fine artistic achievement. This folk entertainment is all very well for the small in spirit; but not you and me, Freda. Not us."

She laid a thin hand on his arm. "You're so right, Benjamin. Caxton—he's the manager at number seven factory—tells me the parts will be ready next week. Assembly is planned for a fortnight's time, at my country—"

"No, Freda. We ought to assemble the camera somewhere where there's no chance at all of a hitch."

"Frightened?"

"Yes. Good God, Freda! You jump into this business wide-eyed, building an illicit projector for all-sensory motion pictures—everything, sight, smell, taste, feel and sound—the lot, and you're prepared to take all the pieces to your own home and set it up there. Suppose Hervey took it into his head to call round?"

"Oh—he wouldn't. And if he did, there'd be nothing for him to see."

"You know what happened to the last people to build an all-sensory projector? And they didn't bother with the taste and smell circuits."

Freda shivered quite genuinely. In a small voice, she said: "The two men were imprisoned for life—manual labour in uranium mines, I believe. The women were—were—"

"They were sterilised and set to work in hospitals doing things that a machine would balk at doing. No, Freda, we have to be very, very careful indeed."

Colonel Hervey called across to them. "Here, you two! The wine of conversation is drying up down here."

They smiled and walked towards the group at the buffet table. As they turned, Russell caught a whiff of Freda's perfume. He found it oddly unsettling; disturbing him.



Julius Strangeman, bobbing his head at Freda, was saying to the colonel: "Freda's the one to suffer by this sort of thing, Colonel. Her business depends on the laws; and the laws depend on you. What do you think Freda," he went on energetically to her. "The Colonel's hot on the trail of some confounded ME people. Again, mind you!"

Russell forced himself to remain calm and to retain that smooth smile on his face. ME—mass entertainment, the obscene word he had successfully shown Freda was not really obscene at all—was red hot news whenever an outbreak occurred. And now Hervey was sniffing at another symptom of the population's discontent with the existing laws. He listened intently.

"Tell us about it, Colonel," Freda said. "This house, the food you're eating and the wine you're drinking are bought from the profits on home entertainment and games. These law breakers are cutting into our pleasures, you know!"

"It's not as serious as that, my dear." Colonel Hervey swelled in his civilian clothes. Russell could imagine him mentally donning his smart dark-grey Entpol uniform. "Just a few wild teen-agers smuggling bits of a projector out of college workshops. They intended to set-up and give—ah—widespread performances in their

dormitories at night. Of course, they didn't stand a chance of being undiscovered."

"The Colonel's so efficient," said Clara. Russell had a stray thought and glanced down at Freda. She turned those milky eyes up and giggled and then, at once, spoke animatedly. "I feel safer about those horrible ME fools every time I think of you, Colonel. How did you find out?"

Hervey laughed with self-satisfaction. "The usual way. Someone who believes in our present civilisation passed the word along."

"Informer," Russell said before he thought. Then he cursed his tongue and rapidly improvised. "Thank goodness someone has the welfare of the people at heart."

Colonel Hervey gave him a quick glance and then said deliberately: "ME came very near to ruining this country, Russell. You know about that, you've been taught the facts at school. You know as well as I do that purveying canned and commercial pleasures to the moronic in all of us—whether we admit it or not, saps the will-power and stunts the imagination. Think of it! A thousand people crammed into a single cinema all with electrodes on head and body, staring in hypnotic fascination at the screen and experiencing all the emotions and feelings of the actors—the whole thing's disgusting and should have been stopped long before it was."

Strangeman gave his short barking laugh. "Oh, I agree with you, Colonel. One hundred percent." He chuckled again. "Still, it must have been quite an experience. Just to be able to sit in your chair and go with Alexander on his world-conquests, to woo Josephine with Napoleon, to be the captain of England and score a double-century against Australia at Lords! There's living for you!"

"Julius!" exclaimed Clara. "I'm surprised at you! Those thoughts are positively heretical—and the colonel is a police officer, after all."

"Just pointing out the dangers," Strangeman said easily. Russell thought there was a touch of unease in the big man. His glance on the Colonel was speculative.

Colonel Hervey's face purpled. "If this wasn't a private party, Julius, why—why, you'd be in serious trouble." He relaxed visibly and managed a laugh. "Sorry, Freda. Mustn't get het up in your house, especially after your enchanting singing, over stupidities that history has proven malicious. Why, Julius, if we'd gone on like that, with men and women spending hours just sitting absorbing coloured and scented fairy stories without any reference to real life, well, the country would have gone to the dogs in a decade. As it is, with the

rationalisation laws, and home entertainment and the prohibiting of any form of ME, we're on our feet again."

Julius Strangeman was no fool, and yet he was a man used to having his own way even when he did not deserve to do. He was an obscure figure in the City, and manipulated paper money and columns of figures which gave him a large house in the country, a yacht, a stable of fast cars, and a red-headed secretary, with a blonde on call. Hervey's remarks and obvious air of righteous disapproval nettled him. Russell watched the marks of the incipient blow-up with amusement. He had an interest in Strangeman's speculations from which he realised enough to live comfortably; he had not thought it necessary or even expedient to tell Freda about that income. If she thought he was dependent on his shares in her companies, her feathery protective instinct could be trusted to do the rest.

Now Strangeman put his glass down slowly and pivoted to take in both the Colonel and his wife.

"That's all very well, Colonel," he said quietly. "But I'm old fashioned enough to question the validity of doing away with all spectator sport. Dammit all, even Lords is a rose garden now! Shades of W.G. and Hobbs and May!"

"I'll take this up as a discussion," Hervey said decisively. "And you're years out of date, Julius. ME brought this country to the verge of ruin. Automation took care of production and office work and redundant, over-paid and under-worked people lapped up this commercial drivel. And then, when you could enter right into a drama, become one of the principal actors, the one of your choice, and producers pandered to the obvious avenues open—moral rot, Julius. Moral rot."

Russell, in his mind, echoed that. Rot! Only men like Hervey, with the power behind them to enforce the new laws, saw to it that the nonsense of control was rigidly enforced. You made your own entertainment now, you or a close circle of friends. There was no more pandering to the weak and debauched, sitting hunched in dark cinema seats lapping up ices and plunging necklines, vicariously sampling the delights dished up by the magnates of the motion picture industry, sailing as close to the winds of decency as they could. No longer need you watch a French film and skip reading the sub-titles for fear you missed a revealing inch of garter. No more. Now you clubbed together and sang madrigals and part songs, played tombola and draughts and, for a thrill, chanced your arm at licensed gambling houses where you used savings certificates for plaques.

Of course, if you were the thick ear type, you could always play

rugby and cricket and soccer, ride to robot-fox hounds or risk your neck in any number of sports. Providing you did not collect a paying audience. Entpol were death on wheels to commercial entertainment.

"What was that, Strangeman?" Russell said.

"I was merely pointing out, my dear Russell, that your quondam association with pictures does not seem to have affected you outwardly." Strangeman pursed his thick lips. "But who knows, not I, least of all the colonel, here, what it's done to your mind. Because you are deprived of making pictures, your mind may decide that was a traumatic experience and one day you'll wake up and find you've axed your wife and can't understand how the chopper came into your hand."

Everyone laughed.

Clara said archly: "But Benjamin's not married."

Freda said: "Not yet." And then blushed and hurriedly called for another drink.

Russell felt a fool. The robot annunciator saved him. "Phone call for Mr. Russell."

Russell acknowledged, excused himself, and went through to the hall. He picked up the phone but left the video dead.

It was Tucker. His usually crisp voice was acidic. It bit into Russell's ear.

"Can you talk?"

"No."

"Trouble. Get over to Lola's place. On the double."

The line went dead.

Damn Tucker anyway! Who the hell did he think he was, issuing his orders grandly like some potentate? And then Russell wryly had to admit that the thin ascetic man was a sort of potentate, a potentate of the underworld, and he had every right to give orders; and to expect them to be obeyed. Russell picked up his plastic cape and, shrugging it on, went back into the salon. Freda's face fell when she saw him dressed for departure.

"Sorry, Freda. Business. I hate to leave like this, feel very ill-mannered. But there's nothing I can do but go." He leaned towards her. "Something's come up. I'll see you in the Landmine tomorrow. About eleven. Right?"

"All right, Benjamin. I was so looking forward to this evening. Is it—?"

"Yes. Tomorrow at eleven, then." He made his goodbyes to the others and Freda switched off the door robot and saw him out into the rain herself.

"I'll walk to the Underground," he said, negating her instinctive motion to dial for a cab. "Exercise."

She stood close to him, her thin lips upturned, and Russell made a big play with his cape and gloves, avoiding those demanding lips. Her perfume tickled his nostrils. He frowned, then wiped his face clean and stepped down onto the pavement and smiled, safely, up at her.

"Don't come down, Freda, dear. You'll get wet."

"As if that matters," she said in a sort of gasp.

He smiled again and waved and walked away, leaving her thin and pliant, silhouetted in the radiance from the doorway.

He did not look back. The links chaining him to her, originating in a purely business deal, were thickening ominously into something he did not want. Her money was attractive; the manufacturing facilities of her factories even more so; but Freda herself was pathetic, weak, demanding and her fragility was a distorting mirror that threw back a picture of Benjamin Russell that Russell found he could not contemplate without queasiness. Was he so black a rogue then? As he sloshed head down through the rain he knew that he was.

He reached Tucker's place in a foul temper that was not sweetened when he saw that Lola was there. He crossed the ankle-deep carpet, cut the beam for a drink and took the glass from the floor pseudopod. As it retracted he flopped onto a chesterfield, crossed his legs and glared at Tucker.

Tucker met his gaze squarely. "Trouble," he said. "I knew it was coming; smelled it as soon as you brought that damn Markham woman in. Now it's here."

"Tell me." Russell kept his voice low and watched Tucker and by so doing kept his eyes off Lola. Tucker moistened his lips with a flicker of tongue. He looked just a fraction off-centre, his usual poise not quite a hundred percent. He had a receding hairline and incipient bags under his eyes and jaw that cosmetics and plastics were rapidly abandoning to advancing years and flesh. But his brittle eyes were as quick and incisive as his voice; he was a dangerous man and could be deadly should the slightest threat to his own safety arise. Or Lola's.

"I'm not going over the old arguments again. I'll just say that the next time you come up with a bright idea I'll toss you off the top of Television Towers. Even Lola with what passes for a brain knew better than to bring in someone like Freda Markham." All this in a calm, detached voice that by its very placidity chilled Russell as no blustering could ever have done.

"I said tell me."

"Here it is then. And I hope it chokes you." Tucker snapped his fingers and Lola sat down at his side. Russell realised that her nervous pacing had been getting under Tucker's skin and he felt a prickle of satisfaction. He still did not look at her, a few degrees outside his circle of vision; but he could not fail to be aware of her nearness.

Tucker said: "Entpol are on to us. At least, they're on to your Markham woman. They turned up a punk called Caxton, who babbled everything. All the parts he was making are down at the station now."

Tightness gripped Russell's chest. On a gasp, he said: "What about Freda?"

Through Lola's harsh laugh, Tucker said: "Her? They'll be calling on her within the hour, I imagine. That's why I didn't talk. Wanted you out of it."

Sickness churned in Russell's stomach. A waft of Freda's perfume assaulted his olfactory senses of memory.

Lola stood up—he heard the rustle of her dress—and cut the beam for a drink. He found he could not resist the impulse to glance at her. She was wearing her electric blue gown with a V-neck that plunged past her waist and the rest of the bodice tied in a bow at the nape of her neck. The skirt was long, but had three cunning slits that reached midway up her thigh. Her piled mass of blonde hair glittered with magne-dust in the lights. She had what Russell always thought of as a foetal face, not fully developed and because of that innocently appealing like some shy creature of the woods. Her cosmetician must earn a fortune. If she was a creature of the woods, then she was one who came hunting, with claws and teeth—and if the cosmetician fumbled, those claws would rake his eyes out.

Her eyes taunted him, brimming over the rim of the glass. "You don't have to worry, Mister Delaney. We need you in the organisation, don't we, Tuck?"

"What's this Delaney business?" asked Russell, wanting to vomit and wondering why his hands trembled on his knees.

Tucker laughed. "Lola's right, Ben. We do need you, even if you do come up with stinking ideas now and then. Delaney. Chuck Delaney. That's you from now on."

"A cover."

"Right. A little plastics work and your own mistress wouldn't recognise you."

"Ben doesn't have one, do you, Ben?"

"Chuck doesn't, you mean, Lola," Tucker said heavily.

"That's right." Lola giggled. "Chuck doesn't, yet."

Something was happening to Russell's legs. They were pushing him up from the chesterfield, spilling his drink. The tremble in his hands transformed itself into the shakes that ran up his arms and into his shoulders and so shook his entire body. He blinked his eyes, three times, deliberately.

"I'll be seeing you later," he said in a voice he did not recognise. "Got some unfinished business. I'll turn into Chuck Delaney when I get back. But, right now, I'm still Benjamin Russell."

Lola moved abruptly towards him, her knee sliding through the slit skirt and then Tucker had caught her arm and was pulling her back. His laughter was coarse.

"Let him go, sweetheart. If he's caught, they can't trace us. And if he wants to squeal, well, I can fix that."

"I won't squeal. But then, I don't intend to be caught. Your gunman won't have any work to do, Tucker."

"You never know, sonny boy, you never know."

As the door slid behind him, Russell heard Lola's: "Ben! Come back, you fool! Come back!"

He went down in the elevator knowing he had signed his own death warrant.

It was still raining. Memory of his casual walk along the slick pavement from Freda's house taunted him. He should have run like a madman to discover that Freda was in danger. He was breathing heavily, his mouth open, and his chest hurt.

The nearest phone booth was engaged and so was the next. He slid the door back on the third, tumbled in coins, dialled and then, when Freda's face swam into focus on the screen, felt the tight, prickly band around his face crack and flow and leave him weak and speechless.

"Ben! How nice! Are you coming back?"

"Listen, Freda," Russell had to swallow hard before he could go on. "Look, dear, there's a little trouble."

Her face changed. The soulful eyes sharpened and all the planes tightened. "What is it, Benjamin?"

"I'm coming over right away. If—anyone should call, you must act dumb. If—If—"

"Entpol?" The words were a whisper.

"Yes. They've arrested Caxton. The parts are down at the station. Freda, listen. You must deny all knowledge of them! Understand? You didn't know what was going on."

"But the orders I gave—"

"All verbal." Fear hit Russell. "You didn't send out any works orders in writing, did you?"

"You told me not to, Benjamin. I spoke to Caxton privately." The obvious line of thought occurred to her. "But he'll know it was me. And I couldn't deny it and let him suffer—"

"He won't. It must seem to Entpol that he was working on orders from someone, and decided to use you as a scapegoat. We've got to make them believe that. Then we can take care of Caxton."

"I don't like it—"

"It's the only way!"

"If you say so Benjamin." Her thin lips drooped. "Come quickly, dear. Colonel Hervey and Julius are still here. But I feel lonely. And—and I'm frightened."

"I'm on my way." Russell hung up and fought the sliding door out. If Entpol had tapped Freda's line, then he was walking straight into a trap. But there didn't seem very much else he could do. And certainly Freda couldn't walk out on her guests without it looking suspicious. So, he was stuck with it.

The city was growling with thunder, and mingled with it the muted roar of the crowds going home from the houses of their friends created a diapason of sound that drummed naggingly in Russell's head. He hadn't stopped to work out why he was acting as he was. He told himself that he owed Freda nothing. In one way, that was true. But in the part of his mind where he lived, where the spirit that was Benjamin Russell peered out onto the world in which he as a person lived, everything shouted that he was responsible—wholly responsible—for Freda. If she fell into the hands of Entpol they would not be gentle with a person who wanted to break the ME laws and so every punishment inflicted upon her would be as if struck by Russell himself.

He found he was sweating as he sprang up the granite steps and waited for the door-robot. After a moment of tense expectancy, he understood that the robot was not functioning. He rang the bell. He knew what it meant, and he grew cold.

"Yes?"

An Entpol constable. Young, smooth, grim, fully indoctrinated by the system that turned his like out in sausage-machine similarity; he would understand nothing of Russell's inner hopes and beliefs and fears. Russell's fears were this youngster's beliefs. The thought, as always, was frightening.

"Miss Freda Markham? An old friend." Russell tried to

give it the patina of surprised and slightly fumbling hesitation natural to a man unexpectedly confronted by a policeman in a friend's house. "What's up? Burglars?"

A sergeant appeared. Russell went in. From the noise going on the hush-box on the wall had been switched off. It would have been hoarse by now.

Freda was sitting, crushed in a wing armchair, her head thrown back and resting limply against the plastic. The salon seemed full of police. Russell experienced again that sick tightening of his stomach muscles. Their sub-machine guns, carried carelessly slung from uniformed shoulders, were like obscenities in a cathedral.

Julius Strangeman, his tanned head more purple than it seemed possible his veins would allow, was standing with hands on hips, talking violently to Colonel Hervey.

The colonel had come alive. Although still wearing civilian clothes, it seemed he had taken charge of the investigation and thereby had invested himself with all the aura of professional chill his uniform could give. He was smiling at the fragile figure of Freda, only half-listening to Strangeman. His wife and Strangeman's secretary were not to be seen.

"just as well you were here, colonel. But, of all people, Freda! It's beyond belief. I'd have thought the girl would have had more sense."

Hervey turned as Russell entered.

"Back again, I see. Russell. You've heard?"

"Heard what? What's the matter with Freda?"

"ME, that's what!" Strangeman interrupted himself, shouting violently. "The little—stupid."

"All right, Julius," Hervey said mildly. "It seems, my dear Russell, that Freda has been monkeying with ME. I must admit to being surprised, myself. I had no idea. The department handling it merely sent around a squad to arrest her, and, being here, I naturally took charge." He motioned negligently to a tall, lean, bristly man in the dark grey Entpol uniform. "This is Captain Ransom."

"Open and shut case," Captain Ransom said as though spitting out each syllable separately. "One of her foremen in the factory was told to produce certain parts, and did so, and, not unnaturally when you consider our present civilisation, some of his workmates became curious and informed Entpol. We very quickly got onto his source of instruction. There can be no doubt. Miss Markham is guilty."

"That's rushing it a bit, isn't it?" Russell asked cautiously. He

went over to Freda. "What does Miss Markham have to say?"

He put one hand on her thin shoulder, feeling the bones through the flimsy covering of cloth and flesh. He bent down. "Freda," he said softly. "It's all right. Everything is going to be all right."

She let her head fall forward from its stiff, backward tilt. Her eyes opened. Russell saw, with shock, that they were clear and composed and soulful. Her lips moved.

"Couldn't—" she swallowed and licked her lips. "Couldn't let—let Caxton—" The effort was too much. Her head lolled right forward and Russell had to catch her under the armpits to prevent her sliding to the floor.

Captain Ransom brayed: "Miss Markham has confessed to everything. She freely admits instructing Caxton to turn out these parts. He was just the tool. She was the brain."

Russell forced himself to act. He looked up, his face flushed. "You can't seriously expect me to believe—Good God—what for? Why? For what reason?"

Colonel Hervey opened his mouth. Strangeman blundered past him, breathing stertorously, his features wild. "Why? Isn't it obvious? Here I come to a woman's house for a pleasant evening and it turns out a hotbed of ME intrigue! What will my shareholders say?"

"Please, Julius." Hervey jerked his head at Ransom and the captain politely took Strangeman's arm and led him to a chair and found a drink. Hervey stood looking at Russell, a half-smile disfiguring his lips.

"I understand how you feel, Russell. You are deeply shocked, like us all. As to why, well—" he did not shrug. Such mannerisms were unnecessary to the colonel. "She was young, she craved excitement, she was in a position to secure it for herself."

"But her business? She has her livelihood tied up in the ME laws." And all the time he acted and forced himself to speak, Russell fought the fear that thrilled through him. What if Freda had mentioned his part in the business? What if she had blurted it all out to Hervey? The colonel would enjoy the little cat and mouse game. It was a divertissement that would vastly appeal to his nature.

"Her business had nothing and everything to do with it." Hervey did not bother to conceal his contempt. It was as though, Russell thought, he was stirring her yielding body with the toe of his shoe. "She needed her business to be able to satisfy the morbid desires festering in her mind. She used her men and machinery to manu-

facture the parts to build into a machine with which to pander to the filth clogging her emotions.

Russell felt awful. He didn't dare to look at Freda. But all this could be the colonel needling him, taunting him, egging him on to saying something incriminating. If only he knew if the colonel knew. Then Russell made a little decision. It was something on the road back to his own self-esteem.

He said, with a polite smile: "You say you've found the parts of a projector and as you are telling me all this about Freda's depraved desires, I assume you have also confiscated the film and checked it."

That nettled Hervey. His lips slid over his teeth, making little dents in the flesh around his mouth. Then, as though consciously willing himself to perform some action, no matter how trivial, that would bring a shield between him and his obvious absence of any reply, he slowly tapped his teeth with one manicured fingernail.

Russell felt reasonably elated. You never took chances with Entpol in small matters; only in the one big chance that had, it seemed, not come off. But there was no danger of Hervey triumphantly pouncing; saying sneeringly: "Who told you it was a projector?" Because, of course, it wasn't. It was the camera that he had been inveigling Freda into having manufactured; and until there was a camera you didn't have a film. He stared at Hervey and took another chance.

"Well, colonel?"

"You haven't known Freda very long, have you, Russell?"

"No. Six months or so, I'd say. Why?"

"So how can you tell what's hidden in her mind?"

"I can't. I've always assumed that she was a normal healthy girl. Now you tell me different and I'm intrigued and puzzled. I wonder where I went wrong in my estimation."

"Any person, Russell," Hervey said sententiously, "who conspires to evade or break the ME laws must by definition be depraved, vicious, salacious and antisocial."

As a snap judgement, that was what was believed by all good citizens in this new world; and if there were a few who had reservations they took good care to keep those doubts very strictly private. There wasn't much Russell could say in answer. The colonel had turned the tables on him. He let Freda flop back comfortably in the chair and stretched and went across to the door.

"I'm all confused, colonel. You know Freda better than I do. I'd have said that she'd have been the last person to fool around with ME; but it seems I would have been mistaken." He didn't have to

struggle to look grave. "What will happen to her?"

"As a criminal she will receive a fair trial and then, as she must be found guilty on the evidence we have, she will be sentenced."

"That's—bad, isn't it?"

"No more than she deserves. Degree of culpability will be taken into consideration. If she could prove that pressure was brought to bear on her or that she was the weak, junior partner in this illegal conspiracy—which I must say, from my knowledge of her—seems perfectly possible—"

"What then?"

"Why, then her punishment might be mitigated. Of course, I can't give any judgement on the case, that will be in the jurisdiction of the judge; but that's how it usually goes in this sort of case."

Russell felt himself nodding sagely, inanely, rather. Captain Ransom called across to the colonel, who excused himself and joined his subordinate. Russell chewed his fingernails, realised what he was doing and stopped. He did not dare look at Freda. There had to be a way out of this mess, and a way that would let Freda go free without incriminating himself. Colonel Hervey came back, smiling frostily, and said: "You'll probably have to testify at the trial, Russell. But there is nothing you can do now. I suggest you go home."

It was an order.

Russell nodded, smiled around emptily, guiltily avoiding the chair with the huddled body of Freda lying so stiff and defenceless, went across to the door and so out into the night. Only when he had reached the pavement and was walking away did the full fact penetrate. They'd let him go. So they didn't know he was the person who had egged Freda into breaking the law. So far—he was still safe!

The rain had thickened into what promised to be an all-night downpour. Street lighting lay laval explosions of colour on wet pavements. In the lights the rain was like millions of tears, extending from infinity to spluttering death against concrete and stone. Russell walked.

He was soddened and heavy with rain by the time he reached Lola's place. His plastic cape tinkled raindrops on compo-tiling. There was no answer to his protracted ring.

Eventually the hall porter, aroused from sleep and puffy-eyed, shuffled into the hallway. Around them the block of flats had that dead, fluffy feeling of large buildings at night. A few lights glowed here and there.

"Moved out," the porter said, yawning. "Just up and moved. A big pantechnicon came and took everything." He found a cigarette

behind his ear, pinched it and put it in his mouth. "I'm just the porter; don't worry me none. I don't have to find new tenants."

"Did they leave any forwarding address?"

"No. I told you, pal. Just up and went. Sudden."

"I see. Thank you."

Russell went out into the night and the rain and the feeling that had swept him when he'd last left here came back again with crude violence to his intestines. He was a marked man. Tucker would never allow him to wander around town, a living lead from Freda to the ring of illegal financiers speculating in ME. Their plans had been big. Russell saw now that he and Freda were very small fry. Once the camera had been built and adapted to use as a projector; the films could be made, with Lola in the lead, and then the money would flow in from undercover, furtive shows—the carnival grounds were full of secret booths and cinemas, he'd been told.

And once the films had been made then no doubt Freda and he would have been expendable. He could guess that now. All that had happened was that they were expendable before the films had been shot. Fate had caught up with them a little early, that was all.

Automatically, he headed home. Russell lived in a small, self-service flat at the top of a twenty storey block near the Park; but with the monorails clanging past the lower windows. Luxury one side, squalor the other. Like his life. It seemed to him that he had to get away somewhere and think. Events had been pushing him around; he needed a breathing space.

Then sanity caught him with one foot extended down the Underground stairs. They'd be waiting for him at home. They wouldn't think he'd go there if he'd found that Lola had moved; but they'd be waiting just in case. If he went home he'd walk into a bullet. So where did that leave?

In the eighteen years of Entertainment-Rationalisation, Russell had made few friends. His intense passion for film making that had ridden him through University, taking full engineering and production courses, had been dammed up the day Rationalisation became law. His whole life study had been wasted. The little money he had had enabled him to live like a man-about-town, doing nothing, taking perverse pleasure in becoming a cabbage. Then Tucker, through Lola, had contacted him and life had promised something interesting, if illegal, again. Tucker's offer to plastics-change him into Chuck Delaney had held good only until he'd walked out on them. He'd really thought they'd take him back and carry on. Now he saw with

bitterness that they meant to get along without him. And that still didn't think up a place to go.

Two drunks brushed past him, almost toppling him down the Underground stairs, and he straightened up with a jerk and began to walk haphazardly down the street. Rationalisation of entertainment had brought many problems, inevitably. Cutting out the evils of slothfulness and lotus-eating had been a wise move; but men still sought pleasure and pubs stayed open all hours now. That might have been clever when there had been other amusements to occupy men's minds; now drink was as much a menace as ME had once been.

Russell turned into the first bar he ran across and drank two stiff whiskies and with the liquor burning his stomach lining helped on ulcer-day by going over the road and eating a plate of bacon and eggs at an all night beanery. He walked out, determined to find an hotel and hole up for the rest of the night. Nothing plushy; just a bed and no questions. Around the monorail stations were the best places for that sort of anonymity.

But under the swooping arches and crossways the shadows gathered thickest.

Thinking that, Russell took care, exaggerated care, perhaps, to keep to the well-lighted avenues. It was a new and unwelcome sensation, this feeling that he must consider himself a hunted man. As he approached the intersection of three monorails where they formed a vaulting arch of interlaced steel girders and sheer ferro-concrete walling, he tried to throw off the nagging suspicion that he was being followed. The feeling persisted.

Slots of darkness opened on either hand. Above them the rails thundered and sang at regular intervals as the few trains whirled past. The rain sleeted diagonally, bringing up great rashes of damp darkness against the concrete. A group of merry-makers roistered past, followed at a discreet distance by a beat policeman. Russell put his head down into the rain and headed out towards bright neons clustered at the pavement level exit from the monorail.

He heard the sharp cry as his foot stepped over the rushing tide of muddy water in the gutter.

"Help!"

Unable to help himself, he swivelled to look. In one of those slots of blackness, under a single revealing lamp, two men beat down upon a third, who raised a white and glaring face, the mouth a black hole leading to hell.

"Help!"

Russell didn't think. He could not stop himself from springing



into the black alley mouth, rushing all aswirl into the struggling group and striking out with his fists. The very tempestuousness of his onslaught deranged the timing of the trap.

Trap it was, Russell saw in the moment his fist connected with a bristly jaw. The white faced, dangling man was unconscious; he could never have shouted for help. Then Russell was too occupied in dealing with the vicious attack of Tucker's two thugs to worry about details. He put a knee where it would do the most good. Something crashed into the side of his head and sparks flew. He kicked out, and grunted as his toe squashed softness. A man screamed. His breath came in ragged whooping gasps. A fist clouted him along the cheek; he ducked far too late and the chance made the next blow slide over his shoulder. Then he butted forward with his head, brought up his knee again and rolled with the thug. One down. The other twisted away, his hoarse rasping like a great engine in the hollow alley.

Russell saw the vagrant gleam of steel. A gun. He kicked, putting all his failing strength into it. The man gulped, dropped his gun, put both hands to his stomach.

Russell kicked him in the face. Teeth cracked. The mouth smeared and blood stained the features, black and shining. Where the lights struck directly, that blackness glistened red.

The second man dropped beside the first. Russell stood, doubled over, one hand pressed to his side, and sucked up the rain-cool night air in nostril-flaring spasms. He felt as though he had been run over by a monorail car.

A voice spoke from the wet and muddy regions about his shoes. "You all right, mister?"

He looked down, blearily trying to focus his eyes.

"Sure, I'm all right." So it was a lie. So anybody might try to roll him in this condition. Russell squinted. The man was small and compact, like a jack-in-the-box; and like a prancing doll he stood up now, wiping his face, and stared hard at Russell.

"You sure look roughed up, mister." A toe stirred the two unconscious thugs. "Two of 'em. Strewth! Well, pal, I owe you my thanks. They was ugly customers."

"Very."

The man moved his head around experimentally on his shoulders as though checking a new universal joint. "They jumped me over across the tracks and dragged me here. Kept dodging from one alley to the next. Then they slid in here fast and started beating me up. Crazy set-up."

"Not quite. They were out to kill me."

Surprisingly, the man said: "So you're Russell, hey? I'm Fingers Farley. They talked about you."

"It's nice to know."

Fingers put a hand on Russell's arm. He could feel the strength of the fingers bite in like multiplied tourniquets. "You don't look so good to me. And I'm beat up to hell! Hey, ain't that funny, though?"

"You sure you're all right, Fingers?" Russell said, his voice seeming to him to echo in the slot under the monorail like a devil's laughter in Hades. "I'm all right. What about you? I'm all—all right—you—what about—"

The single light began to sway in drunken surges. The last thing Russell saw before he blacked out was a quizzical, monkey face with a comical expression of lugubrious woe bending over him.

The same face was in his vision when he awoke. The monkey-like visage cracked in a smile. Pale blue eyes shone in light from a source high in the angle of roof and wall and Russell realised that he was lying on the top bunk of a double, his nose almost brushing the wood. He felt as though each separate bone and muscle had been extracted from his body and used to make racquets for a protracted session on the Centre Court. And his head had been the ball.

Fingers lifted Russell's head and placed a tumbler to his lips. Gulping the water down and feeling it seep through his whiskers, Russell just wanted to lie back and sleep.

He slept for some indefinable space and then Fingers was back with food and a drink and a cheery word. Russell could not have been overlong in recovering. His head still ached; but by the afternoon he felt well enough to swing his legs over the side of the bunk and slide to the carpet. Fingers tut-tutted like a hen over her chick. Russell saw that he was in a wooden shack, with roughly home-made utensils and a garish pot-pourri of furnishing styles.

"You like my place, huh, Russell?" Fingers asked expectantly. His wizened face creased into a permanent smile.

"Call me Ben. Yes, you seem to have salvaged a lot of junkshop hardware, Fingers. But it's sort of cosy."

"Got it together meself. Took time. But every item is hand picked."

The banalities soothed some of the tension in the air.

"Where are we, Fingers?" Russell said abruptly. "Who are you? What's going on? When is it, even?"

"Whoa, pal, whoa." Fingers opened a cupboard with his toe and juggled two glasses and a bottle to the table. "As to when; it's afternoon. Saturday afternoon, so the grounds'll be jam-packed."

"Grounds?"

"Sure. Carnival grounds. Where else?"

Russell took the proffered glass and drank slowly. Whisky. The fumes coiled close in the shack. "So I'm bucking the law now, whether I like it or not."

"That's your viewpoint, I expect, Ben. Me, I take the cards as they fall. This shack, now. Perfectly legit. Coppers can call any time they want." Fingers drained his glass, made a face, and put the bottle away. The cupboard made a dry click as it shut. "But what I do when I wander into the grounds—" He shrugged elaborately.

"So you're a Carny. I should have guessed."

That permanent smile of Fingers' turned out to be not so permanent after all. He said seriously: "Look at it like this, Ben. A fellow works his statutory hours per week on a job that has to be done to keep the wheels turning. If he's lucky, he likes what he's going. If he's like most, he loathes it. Automation, mechanisation, they take the life out of industry."

"Maybe. But it's not for long. Then he relaxes."

"That's a laugh; He has to do more work to provide amuse-

ment for himself. You know the sorry little groups that sing madrigals and play cards and club together on amateur theatricals—without an audience.”

“Non-participating sport and entertainment are a vice, a depraved left-over from savage rites. So the ME laws say. A hundred thousand men watching twenty-two kick a ball about, and they call themselves sportsmen. Half of them couldn’t even lift the ball off the ground—”

“Just whose side are you on, Ben?”

“I sometimes wonder, Fingers. I know, I feel, that entertainment isn’t the depraved racket the ME laws suggest. I didn’t study motion pictures to pander to the erotic and degenerate tastes of weak-muscled slugs drugged in twenty-four hour a day orgies of hallucination. I wanted to produce pictures that were artistic, that said something. But people did pander to the lowest emotions of the masses. And so I guess legislation had to come.”

“It’s gone too far.”

“Yes. You halt the evils and so the finer aspects suffer, too. After a day’s work a man has a right to a little entertainment, watching other men working at their sport. But non-participating sport was a dangerous growth, Fingers. I don’t call a fellow a sportsman who watches other men play sports or ride races. Do you?”

“Depends on degree. Ever go to a dance and see the wall-flowers?”

“Why, sure, before rationalisation.”

“Precisely. Now, you’re not allowed to sit out at a dance. If you go, you dance. You don’t dance, you leave. You’re not allowed to sit and listen to the band.”

“You sound bitter.”

“I used to be a conductor. Symphony Orchestra.”

“That explains your talk.”

“Sure. Eighteen years of bumming around, and I still dream of the Festival Hall.” He jerked the cupboard door open again so that it squealed. “I need another drink.”

“But it doesn’t explain why you assumed I was against rationalisation.”

“You talked when you were lying there. Babbled. You were planning on building a camera and projector for all-sensory pictures. Very naughty.” Fingers held out a glass.

Russell took it, his first panic thoughts subsiding. “That doesn’t mean I don’t see the reason behind rationalisation because I do. The workings annoy me sometimes.”

"You mentioned a girl called Freda."

A thermo-nuclear bomb seemed to go off in Russell's brain. He slopped whisky down his shirt. For some moments he could not speak. At last, he said: "I'd forgotten Freda. Forgotten her. Did I tell you what was on my mind, Fingers?"

Fingers walked away, drank his whisky and said without looking round, his face against the window: "You said the cops had picked her up for building your camera."

Russell opened his mouth and his throat muscles worked. But he could not say a word.

"You gonna let the cops prosecute, Ben?"

"What else can I do?" His words were strangled.

"Give yourself up."

"No."

"Y'know," Fingers said ruminatively. "It's a funny thing. A man lives his own life, wrapped up in music, unable and unwilling to peer out between the bars of a score, and then he wakes up and finds out that what he does is illegal. So he goes half-crazy. Then he bums around. Then he joins the carnies. Know what I do, Ben? I conduct a little twelve-piece orchestra. Got a flea-pit of a place out in the dumps. Play Beethoven and Mozart and Brahms. Sounds kinda funny, thin and unbalanced. But the audience—yes, that filthy word—they lap it up. Craving for the sound of a real orchestra that doesn't have surface hiss and bad tone control and hi-fi's a rude word." He turned tiredly from the window and smiled at Russell. "I can't judge any man, Ben. I can't tell you what to do. It's all in your head, boy. All of it."

"Don't you think I don't know that? It's tearing me apart! I don't owe Freda anything. Nothing, you hear me!" Russell's hands knotted. "She got caught, I didn't. It's as open and shut as that."

"The way you told it, feverish, she needn't have been."

"She brought it on herself. Cracked up."

"Maybe. I'm not judging. Who's Tucker?"

"That louse?" Russell told him, in short, bitter sentences.

"No hope of finding him or the syndicate, now."

The pale blue eyes held Russell. He felt as though his personality was being flayed off, skin by skin. Fingers said: "Have you thought that this syndicate must show pictures somewhere to make their money?"

"Well?"

"They'd be likely to sell them or show them in or around the

Carnival grounds, wouldn't they? They'd have——"

Russell gripped the little man's shoulder. "You think you could turn them up? A sign? Something to get back to Tucker and Lola?"

"Mebbe. But suppose I did. Suppose I came and told you that old Flicks Peabody was buying motion pictures, all-sensory, for his theatre from a syndicate with this Tucker heading it up. What would you do then?"

"Do? Why I'd—I'd——" Russell's rush of words died.

"Yeah. Easy, isn't it?"

"I could bust him one on the nose for a start."

"And for a second, after you'd let the black blood out?"

Russell wasn't sure whose black blood Fingers meant.

"You find out for me, Fingers. I'll think of something."

"I'll do that, Ben. As a person, you're in the clear from Entpol. Only Tucker's gunning for you. And a plastics-change from the professor can turn you into someone else. Yeah, you're safe. But Freda isn't."

"Damn Freda! I'll worry about her! If you want to help then just turn up Tucker. Then I'll take over from there. Okay?"

Fingers smiled and tapped the bottle. "Okay, Ben."

The time that Russell spent holed up in Fingers' shack opened his eyes to the perseverance of mankind in finding ways of circumventing the laws of the land. The ME laws had outlawed all kinds of spectator entertainment and sports for the good of the communities around. It had been like the cold turkey cure for a hophead. Now, most people were over the first shock and accepted a life wherein all entertainment had to be made by themselves, where sport meant taking part and not cheering from the sidelines. A world where radio was used solely for news broadcasts and government propaganda and paid advertising. A world where the TV screen was a symbol over church doors, stigmatising the lures of the devil. Most people. But, inevitably, there were those who purveyed and those who bought illicit pleasures. Men like Fingers who conducted a curtailed orchestra in the great works that were never quite the same on a recording. Boxing and wrestling, all the usual sports, where men came furtively to the back alleys of the towns and the dump lands on the outskirts. And there were those, like old Flicks Peabody, who showed films that might have nothing obscene about them and yet pandered to the starved of spectacle and colour and romance. It was a strange half-world where Fingers lived, in a tumble-down shack on the edge of the dumps.

Entpol knew, of course, and periodic raids cut swathes through

the ranks of the Carnies. But there were always more, as there always had been more to, bypass any law yet made, and, Russell supposed, there always would be.

And this enforced idleness, with the occasional news broadcast telling him of the slow process of Freda's case through the wheels of justice, turned him bitter and sour and brooding. He hardly spoke to Fingers beyond the repeated query: "Have you found Tucker yet?"

Guilt for her nagged at him. And shame for Fingers. The little conductor fed him and housed him and Russell could do nothing in return, apart from cleaning up the shack. He did not go out. There was nothing to go out for, yet.

Into his mind now had been fixed the obsession that he could do nothing to help Freda until he had found Tucker. Vaguely, he realised that there was a fallacy in that thinking somewhere; but he was too tired and dispirited and self-hating to bother to try to find out. He drifted.

He drifted with the tide of circumstance. And like any piece of driftwood, he was caught in back-eddies and whirlpools, when anger and shame made him rage through the shack striking impotently at air. And—like any piece of driftwood—he came eventually to the sea.

Fingers bustled in one day, shedding his plastic cape and the big folder containing tattered scores. He tossed his baton onto the table and let out a great breath.

"On to something at last, Ben."

Russell looked up from the stove where he had eggs and beans cooking. Stains smeared the sacking apron he wore.

"What, a new second violin to replace that boy the cops picked up?"

"Nope. Saw old Flicks Peabody today. Someone had offered him new motion pictures. A man he's never seen before."

Russell put the spoon into the beans carefully. He lifted some out and tasted them experimentally.

"Good. Hungry, Fingers?"

"Did you hear what I said?"

"Sure. A guy claiming to have new motion pictures. You know the difficulty of building an all-sensory camera. And when Entpol burned all the old films—what a fire that must have been—the few that were sneaked out have been printed and re-printed. What's he got, Fingers, that old Flicks Peabody doesn't know about? It's a come-on, that's all."

"Peabody didn't think so. This jerk showed him some frames. He didn't recognise them."

"Any good photographer could fake up a few frames."

"Flicks Peabody didn't think they were fakes." Fingers coughed. "I never did get married, Ben, you know that. I was married to music, body and soul."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"When the laws took my music away, something died in me. Something I'd had went cold. But you, you never produced a picture in your life. All you ever did was go through University learning about it. You never had it to lose, Ben."

"What's with this lecture? Aren't you hungry?"

"The beans can wait. All I'm telling you is that I've asked the Professor to call round this evening."

Russell put both hands on the table and leaned towards Fingers. Elaborately, he smelled his breath. "You been drinking, Fingers? First you pitch some tall yarn about Peabody being offered non-existent films. Then you go all starry-eyed over not being married. Now you toss in the professor. What for, laughs?"

"When I first met you, Ben, those three things would have tied together. You're getting punchy, lying up here."

"So I'm going off my rocker. So all right. Now suppose we eat."

"All right, Ben," Fingers said, surprisingly agreeable. "I am hungry. We'll talk after dinner."

"Punchy," Russell said and slopped eggs and beans onto plates and poured tea.

They were just finishing their third cup of tea when the Professor knocked. Fingers answered, cautiously, and then threw the door wide and closed it quickly. The professor moved into the light.

He stumped awkwardly. Immediately, Russell was struck by the theatricality of the man. He wore an immense floppy black hat, which, when removed, revealed a thick thatch of startlingly white hair. The black cape flared dramatically. The Professor had sharp bright eyes and a broad, knobbly, enflamed purple nose. He moved like an old time theatre ham and his voice was a booming basso profundo.

"And so this is the lost lamb who has strayed into the pastures of the damned! By all the gates of hell, Fingers, he looks a likely lad, although peaked. What say—"

"Come off it, Prof," Fingers said casually, sitting at the table to finish his tea. "Ben's not a paying customer. At least, not yet." He hooked up a chair. "Sit down and have a cuppa."

"Not a paying customer?" The Professor's voice had changed. It was ordinary and a little peeved. He threw off the cape and sat

down. He reached up a hand and slid the top of his head forward. The white hairs came off, revealing a crisp pate of blonde curls. He did something to his face and the bloated whisky nose came away in his hand. Twinkling eyes regarded Russell maliciously and yet with depths of fun.

"All tricks of the trade, Ben," Fingers said. "Prof has to impress the customers."

"'Sright. If they saw me like this they wouldn't trust a Bart's trained man. But a whisky-soaked old quack, hell, they'd trust him with everything they've got."

"What about the leg?" Russell said.

The Professor made a face. Lines dragged beneath his eyes. He was young; yet he was prematurely aged.

"Wooden. Just a damned single-shaft stumper."

"What happened? Or would you rather—?"

"I'll tell you. For what it's worth. You recall the cup-tie when the stands collapsed? Not at Wembley; this was the new stands. Three hundred people killed and as many more injured? Well, I was one of them. Crushed my leg with a few tons of dead bodies on top of me. Hot. Smelly. They got me out but they left my leg behind."

"That was a week before rationalisation, wasn't it?"

"'Sright. If I hadn't got caught up in the mass hysteria and gone to the cup-tie and pushed and shoved with the rest, and had my leg crushed off, I'd still have it now."

"The ME laws were just a week too late," Fingers said softly.

"'Sright. So now I'm a whisky-soaked old quack who has to dress up to act the part he really is. Poetic."

"In the cupboard, Ben," Fingers said. "The good stuff."

Russell put the bottle on the table and the Professor poured. His hand was as steady as a gyro and he filled the glass with micrometer precision. He flipped it back in one gulp. "Here's to ME, God rot it."

"Is he a good subject, Prof?"

The Professor glanced at Russell as he poured another shot. His accuracy was not impaired.

"Yep. How do you want him to look?"

At this Russell was astonished to see the volatile Fingers appear to shrivel, rather, to retire in embarrassment into some hitherto unsuspected shell. "Aw, I guess—"

The Professor looked closely at the little man. Then he reached out and patted him on the shoulder.

"I get it, Fingers. I'm no head-shrinker; but I sort of guessed your needs. Words here and there." He stood up. "Let's you and me take a little stroll. You stay here, Ben. And leave some of that gut-rot for me. Won't be long."

They went out. Russell poured a drink and sat, morosely, sipping it and wondering what went on. The thought of Freda had dulled now. Her perfume was almost a forgotten wisp. He had imagined her, hair shaven, dressed in coarse grey, hands rough and unkempt, sitting blindly in her prison cell awaiting the day when she would be sentenced. Or did they save the uniform and wearing-down psychological routine until after the trial? He didn't know. All he could see was Freda sitting, slumped and unhappy and not fully understanding what had happened to her. And, somewhere in the picture, a little frame with Benjamin Russell's head in it, laughing inanely, chuckling with glee, because it wasn't Russell in that cell but the girl he had put there.

No wonder he had nightmares.

Fingers bounced back into the shack. His monkey face was flushed but a wide smile stretched his mouth and his eyes were shining the way a child's eyes shine on Christmas morning. The Professor stomped up afterwards and came straight over to Russell and began pummelling and mauling his face. Russell felt the delicate, slender strength of the fingers. Strength that had come by skill in distinction from the strength nature had put in Finger's hands and taken from his body. The Professor breathed out slowly through his nostrils, his mouth firmed shut.

"A good 'un, Fingers. I can do it. Have you told him?"

"No. You do it. I'll tell him."

"My place, three o'clock tomorrow afternoon. Where's that drink?"

The Professor finished his drink, put back his camouflage of wig and false-nose, clapped on his hat and swept out with his cape swirling. His voice floated back, deep.

"Tarry not, sinners all, lest the fires of Hell cool to char your bones."

"Quite a character," commented Russell.

"He's all right. Losing his leg upset him, to put it mildly. But he's one of the best plastics-change men in the business. Three o'clock tomorrow, Ben."

It was the first time Russell had been out since the night of the tragedy. He sniffed the air as they walked quickly past the piled dumps and out onto a gravel track. Air moved coolly and it had

rained recently; clumps of long grass and weed patched the dumps in vivid green.

The Professor lived in what had once been a monorail car. It had been turned upside down and the interior fitted with the bare essentials of living. A heavy triple-plastic curtain halved the compartment. Russell had noticed the isolation of the shack; the Professor's home seemed even more deserted. Along the horizon the towers and trellises of the city jagged the sky and already neons were staining the afternoon overcast.

The Professor welcomed them briskly. He was wearing a spotlessly white operating smock—part of the mumbo-jumbo, he'd call it—and he waved them into the curtained off half without delay. Russell realised that he was not surprised to find the neatness and sterilised efficiency of the operating theatre here. It fitted.

A middle-aged woman, wearing a white smock, and with the sort of face you'd expect to see pushing someone else's perambulator in St. James's Park, motioned Russell to lie on the table. As he lay down, the Professor began uncoiling heavy quad cable, backing out through the doorway.

"Just connecting up our power from the public supply," he explained. "There is a convenient junction box on the city's electric system here. This time is off peak."

"They'll trail us one day." The woman spoke without emotion. "One day, right in the middle of an op, they'll walk in with their little meters pointing right at us."

The Professor came back. "But not today, Martha, not today. Today we give Fingers a—"

"I said I'd tell him, Prof." Fingers' voice was loud.

"'Sright. Sorry. Now, Ben, you fit? Good."

Just as the anaesthetic took hold, Russell realised that no-one had asked him if he wanted to be changed.

It was just as well. He couldn't have given an honest answer.

During the operation Russell dreamed dreams which he tried unavailingly to forget when he awoke. He felt very weak and light-headed and the after-image of his dreams burned into his brain in an unnatural way, frightening him. Everywhere he looked, it seemed, he saw Freda's thin, pathetic face and soulful eyes and smelled her perfume. The scent had clogged into his nostrils and he couldn't wash it clean.

Fingers bent over him, his wizened face drifting oddly in and out of focus. "Sit tight, son. You're going to be all right. Just rest and get your strength back."

Russell did not reply. He wondered why a simple facial should weaken him so. It was his constitution, weakened by idleness and debilitated by lack of exercise. He set about mending himself with a grimness of determination that surprised him with its meaninglessness. What did he have to get fighting fit for?

Freda? Hardly. Any day now they'd be staring at her from under their idiotic wigs and prodding and probing with questions until her brain addled. Then they'd shave off her hair—if they hadn't done already—and dress her in coarse grey and set her to scrubbing floors—or something similar, something over which she had shuddered in imagination on that long ago day when he'd last seen her. He stirred restlessly on the high bunk of the double and tried to force his thoughts down other pathways. Inevitably, they returned to Freda. He wondered how Colonel Hervey was treating her. And whether that cowardly louse Julius Strangeman could ever meet her eyes again.

The news that finally aroused him spurted from the crazy wireless. Fingers switched on a few moments before a news announcement, catching the fading tones of a dulcet spot-ad pushing a do-it-yourself harmonium kit.

He listened to the news with the same amount of interest as he had given to the advert. None. Stories of politics and economics and new efficiency drives. One or two murder cases; one stemming from a fanatic husband who had turned up the fact that his wife had once been an actress. Soon there would be the interminable lists of football results, all of amateur games; Entpol were sufficiently aware of the basic need of men to show off and to receive praise. And if you didn't have an audience—by law—to see your side win; what the hell, why play? And so this minute concession to logic. And then Russell half raised on the bed, his stubbled face tightening up into a grimness in startling contrast to its previous slack vacancy.

"Miss Freda Diana Markham, owner of the Markham Group who manufacture musical instruments and hobbies and games kits, arraigned on a count of conspiring to break the ME laws, will stand trial in two days' time. Counsel for the defence has not yet been briefed and—"

"Turn it off," Russell said violently. "Turn it off!"

"Sure, Ben. Sure." Fingers silenced the set. "Looks like it's come at last."

"Damn them! Damn her! Damn the whole artificial lot of them!" Russell turned over and thumped the wall until his knuckles bled. "She went into it with her eyes open. I told her not to admit anything. We could have got Caxton out okay. Tucker could have.

And the poor pathetic fool couldn't stand to have a manager on her conscience and so now look where she is. Oh, damn! Damn! Damn! "

"No counsel briefed for the defence," Fingers said. "And the trial in two days." He sighed. "That's always the way of it. Any barrister will jump at the chance of a juicy murder however black the case may appear; but a person breaking the ME laws? Not on your life! They'd rather starve first."

"Freda'll get a barrister." Russell slumped back on the bunk, his puny flare of anger draining his energy. "Her money and her old family solicitors. They'll find counsel."

"But two days! "

Russell laughed. "Maybe that's good. Maybe they don't find anyone and so the trial can't go ahead until someone is appointed. The pre-trial hearings were like that and then the fellow flanked out. Maybe—" he looked at Fingers. "Maybe—"

"Don't kid yourself, son. Your girl'll be charged and found guilty and sent to penal servitude for life no matter how barbaric we may think that. It's the law, to protect the weak-willed morons from an excess of entertainment. No lotus-eaters, by order."

Russell forced himself to say it. He'd been pretending that no hope existed; that there was nothing he could do. The law would take its course, grinding the souls of Freda Markham and Benjamin Russell exceedingly small in the process; and there was nothing he could do to stop it. So, now, he said "Did you turn up any more on that fellow selling fresh films to Flicks Peabody, Fingers?"

A fugitive expression—surprise? pleasure?—flicked across Fingers's monkey-face. Quite steadily, he said: "Do you *really* mean that, Ben?"

Did he? "Oh, I suppose so. Won't do any harm to make a few enquiries around."

"Flicks has seen this fellow coupla times since I mentioned it to you. Name of Powell. Big, clumsy, narrow-eyed guy with hairy hands. He's supposed to be bringing along a few reels tonight to let Flicks see the merchandise."

"Tonight." Russell swung his legs over the bunk and flopped to the floor. Although weak and jittery, he felt strength flowing back. A good meal and a shot of whiskey and he'd be a new man. That was a laugh. He was a new man.

"Where's the mirror, Fingers? Want to see what I look like."

Fingers handed it to him, a strange, expectant, fearful look about him that amused and disturbed Russell. He had the impression that

more was in the air than he suspected. He told himself that the unease stemmed from fears for his own safety and the fiercely-resisted understanding in him that he was a coward, a louse, a weakling, everything that was contemptible in his relations with Freda. And these new friends of his, Fingers Farley, the Professor and Flicks Peabody, although he had not met him as yet, these outcasts of society had accepted him without thought of reward; he had nothing to fear from them.

Why then this electric sense of personal fear?

He looked into the mirror.

And understood. A single long, comprehending scrutiny of his new face; and then he allowed the mirror to slip from his hand. It shattered to pieces on the floor.

He had seen the face that stared back at him before. Not quite the same, perhaps; less of the wizened wrinkles and more breadth of forehead and chin. But, superficially, he now resembled Fingers Farley. A furrowed, grotesque, monkey face! A face that, on him, grimaced idiotically!

A cataract of darkness fell over his eyes. He groped blindly forward, filled with fury, shame, self-pity. His fist struck Fingers, knocking him down. He was gasping and choking; a fiery band seemed to press in around his forehead and throat, stupifying him. Somewhere there was the sound of water dripping, monotonously, maddeningly. A sense of asphyxiation crowded in on him. He had to get out of this shack.

He burst through the flimsy door in a splintering of timber and ran and fell and bled and crept away into the sheltering darkness where no-one could look upon his shame.

And the shame he felt, cowering in the lee of odorous slag-heaps, was for himself; that he could not bear to wear the face of the man who had befriended him.

He understood what Fingers had meant, talking to the Professor. Fingers had never married; the Professor had a great liking for the little man. It added up to something that was not terrible or unnatural in the slightest degree.

Fingers had wanted a son.

And Benjamin Russell, wandering into his life alone and a fugitive and thereby gaining the affection the lame dog arouses, had been the inevitable object to fill that empty place in Fingers' emotions. And so they'd turned him into a fair imitation of what a son of Fingers' might well have been.

Really, when he looked at it, Russell saw that it was funny.

And with that sane realisation—and with the sudden prick of sanity informing that what had once been altered could be re-shaped—the rest of his tortured life in this scientific age of rationalisation shaped a shining path for him to follow. Wind stirred little wisps of dust from the dump. He smelled Freda's perfume. And so that was the way of it. He'd fought against it perhaps too hard. He'd chosen only to see the ugly, the pathetic, the weak and unprepossessing in Freda in instinctive self-protection. By doing that he had high-lighted the very reasons for loving her. The blacker he painted her, the more his responsibility she became, until now he had come to the final bitter knowledge, cowering on filthy rubbish dumps cut off from the city and the life that was his by birth and inclination, that he could no longer put off acting on the decision his subconscious had formulated weeks ago.

He stood up, kicked a half-brick and a broken bottle from his path and walked steadily back to the shack. The broken door gaped. Fingers was sitting at the table, head in hands, his shoulders bowed. A glitter of light sparked up from the floor where the broken mirror lay.

"I'm sorry, Fingers." He spoke composedly. "Did I hurt you?"

Fingers looked up. The expression on his face, shining from his eyes, curving his lips, first shrivelled and then lightened and uplifted Russell's spirits. Fingers said: "Black eye. That's all. Look, about the op, I'm—"

"Save it. It's all right. I'm over it. Tell me about this fellow who's been touting films to Flicks Peabody."

One result of that telling brought them to Peabody's illicit cinema towards dawn. Tacitly, the subject of the operation had settled between them. Fingers seemed to have understood Russell's new drives and motives and Russell was sardonically aware that there was probably a great deal more about him that the little conductor knew.

Russell waited in the rosy half light of dawn, hearing birds twittering and raising a cheerful melody over the wastelands of the dumps, where stubby trees masked hidden cinemas and boxing rings and prosceniums. He waited impatiently whilst Fingers talked inside the rash of broken brick and smashed masonry that concealed Peabody's cinema with its owner. Then the wizened face appeared, a finger beckoned. Russell went inside.

Flicks Peabody was stoop-shouldered, thin-haired, carrying a paunch. His eyes swam yellowly above sagging bags. He smiled at Russell, showing a set of perfect teeth, too perfect to be real.

"This guy Powell had the right stuff," Flicks said.

Fingers spoke eagerly. "He's bringing half a dozen complete epics tonight, Ben. That's our chance."

"Hold it." Russell stared at the little man. "My chance, you mean. You don't want to stick your neck out with Tucker and his mob. Entpol's enough for one man."

Fingers protested; but Russell remained adamant. He had his own way. All during that day he watched from Peabody's rooms, peering through a crevice in the tumbled masonry, watching the rubbish carts file out from the city in a never-ending procession, dump their loads and crawl back again to empty the overflowing dustbins and rubbish shoots. Incinerator squads fired up the piles of refuse, sending dank black clouds surging sluggishly into the air; water sprays sheeting silver curtains of disinfectant sliced through in feeble attempts to conform to sanitary laws. It was frighteningly easy to see how the Carnival grounds had arisen like mushroom growths on this waste land. Under those piles of burned and partially decomposed refuse lived another city of living and breathing people. The Carnies. The folk driven from the only livelihood they had known, honest, laughing, carefree people now harried into underground ventures catering to natural appetites of other people denied those pleasures they required by law. And, inevitably, there suppurated with them the petty criminals and hangers on, the fringe that desecrated any worth-while pattern of human endeavour, even an honest life lived in defiance of arbitrary and harsh rules. Russell did a lot of thinking that day, waiting for the night and the man who was to lead him to Tucker and Lola.

When at last, in response to Flicks Peabody's urgent whistle, Fingers came running, Russell was ready, taut strung in every nerve.

He'd found the difference between condemning the heady laughter of the roundabouts and rapt concentration in a great symphony and including in that condemnation the owl-like hunching before mesmeric TV screens night after night. It was a matter of proportion. Entertainment was a vital necessity to man—had been from the earliest cave fires—and a natural release for his emotions after the day's work was essential. But the fools carried it too far. Night after night, and then afternoon after afternoon, clamped before the TV screen, growing weak-sighted and crooked-backed and watery-muscled. And then twenty four hours a day, TV and films and tri-dis and all-sensory pictures. Instead of playing a game of football with the local team, they crowded a hundred thousand strong and, watched other men play. And then coughed and panted their way home, too flabby

to run for buses and trains, and full of the imbecilities of those men who had played. Russell knew now where the line had to be drawn.

And then sardonic irony came to him. What could he do about drawing lines, when he was hunted by an ME lawbreaker and with the guilt of Freda riding his brain like fire?

He followed Powell, the man who was to lead him to Tucker, and he began to feel very sorry for what was going to happen to him.

It wasn't at all difficult. Powell cut straight through the Carnival grounds, avoiding the worst of the malodorous areas, heading for the monorail terminal. Dark figures passed them. Men and women scurrying with covered faces to some hole in the ground, a sagging arch, a crumbling half window with broken bricks, giving the place a disused air. But inside, crowded in close hot-smelling rows, they were watching the screens, feeding on boxing and wrestling, listening to orchestras, sublimating everything in an all-sensory epic.

After a time Russell grew hard-hearted about it. He simply brushed past these furtive night-hawks and allowed them to cower away from him. He kept within easy distance of Powell, tracked him up to the monorail station and bought a ticket and sat in the first car and felt confident that he had not been spotted.

The car started with a shrilly ascending whine from the propellers that shivered away into the supersonic. They whirled through the night towards the city—and Tucker.

A tiny quiver of doubt played in Russell's mind. Tucker had the metropolitan's love of flat-dwelling and it was more than likely that he was set up in a new love-nest with Lola at the top of a block of super-flats. Powell would go in, take the lift, and then disappear. There had to be a way of finding the floor and flat number. Russell alighted and followed Powell down and onto the street. A considerable number of people were about this early in the evening; cynically, Russell guessed that the destination of many must be where he had just left. Occasionally Entpol carried out a check of the monorails; but you couldn't charge a person for taking a ride into the country, even if that country did not begin for a few miles past the rubbish dumps.

Powell strode along and Russell was content to let him. The flat business had him worried. At last he decided that boldness was his only hope. So that, when Powell turned smartly into an expensive new block of flats, Russell was ready. He sprinted to cover the gap, walked briskly into the foyer in time to see the lift doors opening for Powell.

He went straight over and stepped into the cage behind the

gangster and politely held the gates whilst an old lady with red-dyed hair and gnarled fingers dragging under the weight of jewelled rings stepped in. The gates closed. They rode up. Powell punched for top floor. The old lady wheeled her jewellery out at the fifteenth.

At the top, Powell looked hard at Russell.

"I think you must have the wrong address, friend," he said, quite civilly, although the edge to his voice was unmistakable.

"Oh?" said Russell.

"Yeah. All the top floor is taken by Mister Delaney. He don't know you."

"And I don't know him," Russell said indignantly. "But I think you must be mistaken. The top floor is taken by Miss Monico." It was the first name that flashed into his mind.

"You must have the wrong building pal." Powell opened the gates and stepped out, sliding them shut behind him. He stared in stony faced. "At least—you'd better have."

He punched the stud and the lift sank. Powell's shoes vanished above him, and Russell found with surprise that his forehead was wet. He mopped it with his handkerchief and smiled. Tucker had had the infernal gall to use Delaney, the cover he'd prepared for Russell. Well, that was just like the man; rough and tough and supremely confident. And also very vicious to anyone in his way.

So now he knew where Tucker lived. And again his mind threatened to enter that coagulated region of no-action. He wanted just to lie on Fingers' bunk and not think. But he saw again the flare of the rubbish dumps burning, sending orange fires to fight the sunset, and throwing into shadows the furtive people slinking out there for an evening's surreptitious entertainment. In some crazy way that gave him strength. In fighting Tucker he was fighting the system. And any fool can buck a system; it takes brains to set-up a system in the first place.

He stepped out of the doorway and grimaced a little as rain splattered into his face. It looked as though it had set in for the night. Cars hissed as they passed on the street.

"Got a light, mister?"

Russell nodded absently and thrust his hand into his pocket. He half turned and the begging cup was thrust under his nose. His preoccupation was such that he smiled at himself for being caught by an old beggar's trick and fumbled for money. Then the beggar, a huddled figure dim in the shadows, showed another of the modern tricks of civilisation.

A thick piece of cardboard was thrust into Russell's fingers as

he released the money over the cup. A thick voice gabbled quickly, as though repeating a lesson: "Best all-sensory flicks on the grounds, mister. Flicks Peabody's. Cheap seats or first class. Always a grand show."

"Just a tout!" Russell said. "You're wasting your time with me."

"Just keep the card, mister. Best entertainment on the dumps."

"I know." Russell was about to add some grimly humorous comment that he had spent all day there, turning to look more closely at this ME tout disguised as a beggar; when he peered more closely, and then chuckled.

"Well I'm damned. Alfonso Gregory. Best wide-screen tri-di man in the business. And working for Flicks, too!"

The beggar scraggled his rags about him, muttered some obscene comment that he didn't know what Russell was talking about, and shuffled off. Another voice spoke.

"Got a match, mister?"

"Oh, hell." Russell swung round violently. "Not again!" Then he smiled, reached forward and thumped Fingers on the shoulder. "What in blazes are you doing here?"

"It's not funny, Ben. I've been tailing you ever since you left Flicks' place. So has Alfonso. Sort of protection."

"Well—was it necessary—that is—" Russell stopped talking, embarrassed. Then he said grimly: "Tucker's in there, Fingers. Now we can let Entpol know all about it and try to get Freda off. Plead coercion."

"Do you really think that will work?" They had begun to walk along the street, bending their heads to the rain, and now Fingers glanced up bright-eyed at Russell in the glow of a street lamp. "Are you happy about that?"

"No, Fingers." Russell's tormented thoughts twisted in upon him with cataclysmic force. "No, Fingers! You're damned right I'm not happy. They'll put Freda away no matter how much they hang on Tucker. She was building the camera."

"Precisely. So what now?"

Russell laughed. The sound was like a ghostly barn door swinging in the wind from hell. "Give myself up."

"Just that? Sacrifice yourself? The easy way out, eh, Ben?"

"What d'you mean?"

"You're giving up the fight. No more guts in you. You defied the laws which you believe wrong and you were not caught, only some girl who was working blindly for you. Now she's caught all you can

do is give yourself up and suffer along with her. Sound right to you?"

"What else can I do? I can't let Freda take the punishment alone. I've got to atone and the only way is to give myself up, take the blame and try to get a lenient sentence for her. Her and her damned scent!"

The moisture glistening on Russell's face was not all rainwater. His fists were gripped into cramped knots, thrust deep into his pockets. His stomach ached and he felt sick.

"Well, Fingers? What else is there?"

"Didn't you say Caxton could have been got out—?"

"Yes." Russell stopped stock-still under a tree and water splashed unheeded on his shoulders. "Good Lord! Tucker could get Freda out! He could! And, by God, I'll make him! I'll make the devil do it!"

"What are you waiting for, son?"

A lighted square ahead showed where a telephone booth huddled against the wall. Russell sprinted for it, flung himself inside and fumbled coins out. He spilled some on the ground. Fingers grunted and picked them up.

Russell checked the phone book, called the top floor flat in the block. He left the video dead.

The voice that answered was cool and amused and purred like a silken-haired cat. Lola. Russell's cramped stomach that had been hurting him all day abruptly relaxed. He felt a surge of strength and confidence. This Lola, this dame with her pathetically amusing gowns that were so daring, no longer had any power over his emotions, over his basic impulses and drives. To him now, she meant as much as a cod's head on a fishmonger's slab. Chalk up another victory for Freda.

"Who's calling, please?"

"Benjamin Russell here, Lola. Tucker around?"

If he'd expected consternation, he was disappointed.

"Why! Ben! How nice." The dagger in the syrup. "Where've you been? Ever so many people have been talking—"

Then another voice, riding over Lola's. Abrupt, incisive, Tucker.

"Russell. I've nothing to discuss with you—"

"I guessed you might not, Tucker. But I have a few things to tell you. Not discuss. Tell." He waited.

A grunt. "All right. Make it snappy."

"Check on this call all you like, Tucker. You won't find me.

But I can find you any time. Just remember that."

"You don't bother me."

"I'm surprised. I would have thought that it would bother you a lot. I mean, a man in your position, he doesn't like Entpol to be able to reach out for him just whenever they feel like it. Do you, Tucker?"

A silence. Russell licked his lips, glad for another reason that the video wasn't on. Tucker would have seen at a glance—apart from the facial—that Russell was shaking with fear and anxiety and worry. He probed.

"Have you been in touch with Freda Markham?"

"Her! That stupid feather-brain. No."

"Well, you're going to, Tucker. And tomorrow. You're going to get Freda out. Tomorrow is the trial. You use your organisation to snatch her as she's being taken to court. You can do it, easily. Child's play. So you do. You get Freda out, nice and smoothly, and then forget her."

"I don't have time to talk to a crazy man—"

"I haven't time to argue whether I'm crazy or not. But if you think I am then you won't be surprised if Entpol get to hear all about Tucker Enterprises and all-sensories and the two dupes, Benjamin Russell and Freda Markham, will you?"

"So you'd squeal on me, eh, Ben?"

One thought hit Russell's mind. *He's broken.* And then a quiet, cautiously warning thought: *He'll try to doublecross me.* Tucker, being the man he was, would inevitably try. Russell gripped the phone harder.

"I'll put you in so deep with Entpol you'll be digging Uranium the rest of your life! I want Freda out and you'll get her out. And you can't duck out; I've got you taped. You can't get away."

Lola interposed gently: "Do you think you'll get away with this, Ben?"

"I don't think. I know. Listen and take this in. When you've snatched Freda from the guards taking her to court take her along to the monorail terminus—the one where your two thugs tried to kill me, Tucker; I'm sure you remember—buy her a ticket to the end of the line and then leave her on the platform for the, let's see, the twelve fifteen southbound. If she's not there at that time, unharmed, mind you, the game's up. Got that?"

And inevitably, Tucker being the sort of man he was, he wrangled over that, too. But Russell's insistent, hammering brutality, frightening himself just as much as Tucker, forced the issue. His hands were

slimy on the phone as he said: "Twelve fifteen, then. Goodbye, Lola."

He cut the connection.

Fingers handed him the dropped coins gravely.

"Will he do it?"

"If he doesn't he'll be sorry."

"Try to be positive about things, not negative. He does it, so all right. What then?"

Russell was angry, mostly with himself. He began to walk rapidly away from the phone box, not wanting to be around when Tucker's thugs arrived.

"What then? I don't know. I'm committed to breaking the law, now. Even though it's a law we consider wrong, it's still a law of the land. Before, it was all a sort of adventure, fun, almost; a blow struck for freedom of man's right to entertainment in his own way. And my own childish ideas of artistic expression. I used to feed Freda the tripe by the yard. God!"

Fingers trotted along at his side. He spoke diffidently "You could always find a home with the Carnies, Ben. With me. We'd be proud, me and the orchestra, and Flicks and the Professor."

They passed the corner where the State gymnasium showed through open doors crowds waiting to exercise on bars and horses and sweat out their boredom. That site had been a TV studio. It had burned for two days. People had wheeled their TV sets up in snarling lines and hurled the cyclops into the blaze. And then the music teachers had formed a union and become a power. As had the gymnasts and sports coaches. In any time of social change, between a settled order of the past and the next period of stasis, the intervening period is one of wild chaos. In ripping away the mechanical slaves that could take a man and give him dreams of grandeur, enslave him in a round-the-clock emotional debauch, there had also been destroyed much that was good. The unbreakable, unflammable gramophone records had been a problem until they shipped them out by the barge load and sank them in the Atlantic. Russell had always hoped that one day at least one disc of each priceless recording might be dredged up and cleaned of weeds and barnacles and used as a master for an enlightened and unborn generation.

Those thoughts cooled his anger towards Tucker. It wasn't all Tucker's fault. The man was a product of his environment, just as was Fingers and the rest. His trouble lay in the reasons he flouted authority, reasons stemming from personal power and money, as op-

posed to some fatuous but unremitting sense of duty animating Russell and Fingers.

"Live with you, Fingers?" Russell said. "I don't know what Freda would say. We might try to start all over somewhere else. Try to make people see that in their hatred of drug-addiction in entertainment, of shows aimed at the lowest common denominator, the moron, they've swung too far over the other way and are destroying real art and beauty. At least, we can try, until Entpol catch up with us."

"You could try, Ben," Fingers nodded. "But it's only a question of time. Civilisation will swing around again in its customs, like it always does. With or without your help. You speak to Freda. She'd like it."

"Out in the dumps?"

"Yes. She'll really live then, instead of being a mummy swathed with social conventions. You speak to her."

In those few sentences, Russell saw that Fingers was taking it all for granted. The rescue, the escape. All as though it could not do otherwise than succeed. He smiled and gripped the little conductor's arm.

"I'll speak to her."

Flicks Peabody was awaiting them when they returned to the shack. "Report from Alfonso. Tucker's shifted out again." He gave them the new address.

There was sweet malevolent pleasure in Russell when he rang through to Tucker at his new address. The conversation was short. At the finish, Russell knew that Tucker was beaten, believing that a vast network of spies tracked his every move. But—wasn't that the truth? Fingers had a lot of men, his orchestra, their pals, on the job. Tucker agreed to make the snatch and gave no more trouble—for now.

Standing on the monorail platform with the time coming up for twelve ten, Russell wondered just when the trouble would begin. Beside him, Fingers fidgeted and self-consciously stilled himself. They were carrying a large hat and coat for Freda, in the event that Tucker had provided no disguise. Passengers moved desultorily through the barrier; a robo-porter trundled past with sacked mail. The air was tumescent, even after the rain, suiting Russell's mood. Something more was coming out of the next few moments than merely rescuing a girl from Entpol; something that would affect his entire life. He coughed and glanced at Fingers.

"Nothing, Ben." Fingers casually lifted his arm. The wrist

speaker was silent. Below, at the ticket-office, Alfonso had the radio transmitter hidden in his begging-cup. The rig had been thrown together by techs out in the dumps. "Alfonso may miss them if they're partially disguised."

The old tri-di impresario didn't miss them. Fingers listened. The time was twelve thirteen. The train was filling.

"On their way up in the lift, Ben. A girl, Tucker and a youth. There's also another man pretending not to be with them. He's the danger man, I expect."

Russell said: "The girl's Lola. The youth's Freda."

A robo-porter whined down the platform. His speaker was chattering about 'Hurry along there, please!' The lift gates slid aside. A last crowd dashed out, heading for the train. Twelve fourteen. Tucker and Lola walked out, Freda between them. Sight of her fragile figure made Russell tense forward. Then he saw the plug-ugly strolling out after them. He watched carefully. Tucker and Lola should now leave Freda and return in the lift. They turned, as though animated by his thoughts, and walked back, leaving Freda standing disconsolately on the platform.

The set-up was obvious. Russell hoped it wasn't too obvious, concealing deeper machinations. He was supposed to rush towards Freda, the thug would shoot him, and then Entpol could come in and clean up the mess. And then chance, the one thing that had not so far entered into the picture, took a hand. Russell had just given Fingers the tip-off and a couple of the orchestra were moving in on the gangster from his rear, their saps ready, when the lift gates flew open and Tucker and Lola rushed out. For the first time, Russell saw that Tucker's face showed agitation, even fear.

Below, whistles shrilled. A helicopter circled and dropped towards the terminus.

The gangster was down; the two members of the orchestra vanishing into the emergency stairs. Russell took Freda's elbow in his fist and ran her across the platform into the carriage. Fingers jumped in and began to close the door.

Twelve fifteen. Propellers whined. The train moved

Tucker and Lola, alone on the platform with the robo porters, rushed across to the train. Behind them, the platform filled with the snappy uniforms of Entpol troopers, their sub-machine guns lifting. Slowly, the train moved out of the station. Russell pushed Fingers aside and leaned from the window. He wanted to see Tucker and Lola receive their desserts. In the front ranks of the police he saw

Colonel Hervey and Julius Strangeman; Strangeman was shouting out: "That's Tucker! That's the man, colonel!"

Russell got it then. Tucker had indeed sent for Entpol to come clean up; he had not foreseen that Strangeman would be with Hervey, or that his connection with Strangeman which Russell had suspected but could never have proved, would rebound in this to him hideous fashion. Tucker's mouth was wide open and he was gasping like a beaten dog. Lola's lips writhed back over her teeth. She was very lovely, even then.

Why he did it, Russell could not fully understand.

He flung the door open, shouted: "Tucker! Lola! In here!"

They fell into the compartment as bullets thudded against the panels. The metal kept out the low-velocity slugs. Windows smashed into ruin. A shard of glass cut Freda's cheek. She put her hand to her face and then looked at Russell. The train roared out non-stop into the country.

Fingers said: "If they stop the train we can break for it before the helicopter gets here. The boys will get us out the other end. That's all tied up." Then, whimsically: "Why'd you do it, Ben?"

"Yes, Ben," Tucker said hoarsely. "Why?"

Lola just looked at him, then at his arm around Freda, smiled, and moved across to Tucker.

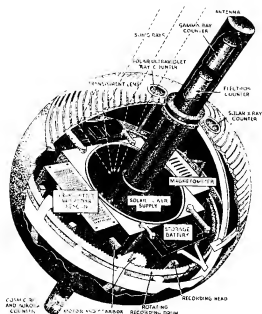
"Why?" Russell said slowly. "Why? I don't really know. Except that I don't like Colonel Hervey and Strangeman is one of the sort who helped to bring about this whole mess. Positive, not negative," he smiled at Fingers. "All right. I'll tell you. Common humanity. Good enough?"

"It'll do," Fingers said. "Although that's not all of it, not by half." He sighed. "You and Freda, Tucker and Lola. You'll all have to hide out awhile with us in the dumps of the carnival grounds now."

Freda spoke, her hand dripping blood.

"I knew Ben wouldn't let us down. You see," she said shyly. "It's in the cause of Art. We have a mission to change the law and bring back Artistic Entertainment."

Russell looked at her and thought of the years ahead. The first thing he'd have to do would be to change her point of view on Art, that was for sure.



SATELLITES and the I.G.Y.

In this article a new contributor to our pages gives us some vital information on the current space satellite programme

Man has long cherished the dream of space travel and the use of artificial satellites during the International Geophysical Year, which began on July 1st, may be the first step.

America plans to fire at least twelve 20-inch moons, each weighing 21½ lbs, into probably elliptical orbits. The aim is minimum and maximum heights of 200 and 800 miles.

The slim 72ft. long Vanguard three stage rockets will be launched in a south-easterly direction from Patrick Air Force Base, Cape Canaveral, Florida. The rocket speeds will be implemented by the Earth's easterly rotation.

The first and second stages of the 22,000 lb. rocket are liquid fuelled, while the third stage, carrying the satellite, is a Guy Fawkes affair, using solid, slow-burning propellant.

All is not, unfortunately, sweetness and light with Project Vanguard. Wernher von Braun, former German missile expert, thinks that Vanguard is a bit of a damp squib. The first stage, he contends, is not powerful enough for the job. In his opinion, the Redstone rocket, developed at Redstone Arsenal, Huntsville, Alabama, is more suitable. Von Braun is in charge of guided missile development at Redstone.

Project Vanguard, under Dr. Milton Rosen, of *Viking* fame, is a Navy-directed, inter-services programme. Inter-services rivalry is common in America.

Von Braun is an army man. His opinion of Vanguard might very well be the first exchange in a race to see who gets a satellite carrying rocket up first. Or will Project Vanguard emerge triumphant?

Although Britain is not sending up satellites, three of her engineers were first in the field with a design study for a Minimum Satellite Vehicle. This was presented by Messrs. Gatland, Kunesch and Dixon, of the British Interplanetary Society, at the Second International Congress on Astronautics, in London, in September, 1951. It is a 16 ton three stage rocket which was designed to carry either a payload of instruments, or, a light-weight inflatable metal foil satellite into a circular orbit about the Earth.

About eight feet in diameter, this inflatable sphere would circle the Earth once every ninety minutes at 18,000 m.p.h. Shining by reflected sunlight, it would be visible just before sunrise and sunset.

America's uninstrumented satellites, although not as large, will provide much useful information.

Intercontinental distances are not as accurate as the scientists would like. At present, there is a margin of error of about 300 ft. in the distance separating America and Europe. Synchronized tracking and triangulation of the satellites from a number of stations known distances apart could help to reduce this margin to about 90ft.

Tracking and triangulation may also help to determine the depth, density, composition and distribution of mass in the Earth's crust. The orbit may be slightly distorted by the planet's varying gravitational attraction as the satellite races round the Earth.

Inevitably, the question of possible military applications of the satellites arises. As the moons spiral in towards the surface, obser-

vations may yield information about the density of the upper atmosphere. The U.S. guided missile men are extremely interested as their ICBM Atlas may have to pass through this rarified region where air resistance cannot be ignored.

The British specification for an artificial satellite of "minimum" proportions was adopted by Dr. S. F. Singer of Maryland University for his MOUSE project.† The illustration above shows the interior of his Minimum Orbital Unmanned Satellite Earth, with the various instruments, most of which have been installed to measure radiation from the Sun, and other sources. MOUSE is the forerunner of the Vanguard satellites.

Cosmic radiation, the origin of which is unknown, is potentially dangerous to life. For this reason, much more data are required before men can risk spending prolonged periods in space. Earth's atmosphere scatters the harmful primaries. Physicists are handicapped in their study for this reason. Only harmless secondaries infiltrate to sea level.

This is a period of intense solar activity and cosmic ray intensity will fluctuate accordingly. The counter in the satellite will measure this fluctuation and the information will be telemetered to Earth.

That other bugbear of future spacemen, meteorites, will come in for their share of attention. Telemeters will relay the data picked up by impact detectors, such as the sizes and velocities of micro-meteorites.

Two previous scientific programmes, both Polar Years, have been held, in 1882-83 and 1932-33. During I.G.Y., a British team under Dr. Fuchs, hopes to trek across the bleak continent of Antarctica. Their work will include study of cosmic radiation, magnetism and aurorae.

The artificial satellites are the forerunners of the manned space stations. From these, the rockets will reach for the planets.

DONALD MALCOLM





New Hard-Cover Science-Fiction Reviewed by

KENNETH F. SLATER

Only one title falling within my own arbitrary definition of science fiction has come my way in the last month; this is Charles Eric Maine's **HIGH VACUUM** (Hodder & Stoughton, 12/6, 192pp). As the title suggests, the story is a "space" epic, the first manned moon trip, and although I was under the impression that John W. Campbell's **THE MOON IS HELL** was the final word on that subject (final worth-while word) I'm very pleased to discover that Mr. Maine adds a couple of later phrases.

I am particularly impressed by the prelude, in the form of an "Operational Programme" of the Western Federation Astronautics Commission, and the various quotes occurring through the novel from the "Handbook of Procedure." I was disappointed by the use of the term "M.O.A." for Ministry of Astronautics—for some time I was wondering what the deuce the Ministry of Agriculture had to do with the yarn

The technical parts of the story are mainly sound, but I was worried about the scene were Patterson, after some deep thought, is struck by the realisation that as the glass envelopes of

the vacuum tubes are broken in the radar equipment, the obvious thing is to evacuate the cabin of the moonwrecked vessel. This didn't seem to be quite in order, although I couldn't put my finger on the snag. A radar expert pointed it out to me—air is an insulator; operating normal equipment in a vacuum is not possible because of arcing and leakage when this insulating is removed, and this is why it is often necessary to pressurise and seal equipments in high-altitude aircraft.

I think that this is a minor "boob"—and anyway there is nothing to indicate that this point had not been taken care of in the construction of Moonship Alpha.

On the human level, we have three of the crew of four men surviving the crash, and the female stowaway—her extra weight is the cause of the vessel's failure—who, it is discovered, had married the fourth, deceased, member of the crew contrary to regulations; had hidden herself on the vessel before take-off (due to slackness on the part of security, selfishness and lack of understanding on her part, and a desire to create a certain set of circum-

stances on the part of Mr. Maine) and now was faced with the same problem of survival as the three crew members proper.

This problem is complicated by various factors; the ship has crashed in a area of high radio-activity, the second vessel has been sabotaged due to the same slackness of the security forces, the medico of the team has a fractured leg, and his communicator has been broken. Owing to the radio-activity the four must spend most of their time in vacuum suits, outside the area of the crater; the doctor has to be helped back and forth each time to perform necessary personal functions; the woman lacks the knowledge of the others and is—naturally—not a favourite; the sabotage of the second ship means that air and food must be stretched to cover an impossible period of time.

Problems on problems. I'm afraid that although there is a survivor, there is not a "happy ending" to the story. It is all the more realistic for that.

Miss Rene Ray is a stage and screen star, and apparently the author of three novels prior to *THE STRANGE WORLD OF PLANET X*, her science fiction offering. Published by Herbert Jenkins, 10/6, 190pp, this is a yarn I'd recommend all Heinlein, van Vogt, J. T. McIntosh, A. Merritt and Ted Sturgeon en-

thusiasts to avoid. It may possibly have some appeal to those of you who yearn for the days of Vargo Statten. Primarily, the little "science" serves as a vehicle for a triangle story. A couple of "scientists" are labouring on discovering "Magnetic Field X", which will give them a new dimension. This activity seems to consist of switching on magnets at the corners (?) of a glass box, in various orders, all made very difficult because they don't have enough hands to throw all the switches at the same time that they wish to throw (they are so concentrated on their speciality, I guess, that they never had time to discover linked and multi-pole switches, nor of any number of ways of solving their difficulties by material available from most good electrical warehouses). Anyway, this business opens a gateway to the Fourth Dimension, and Gavin Laird (one of the two scientists) decides to use it for no good purpose. Quite what his "no good purpose" is, or quite why the other scientist, David Graham, thinks M.F.X. should be forgotten, I couldn't make out. But Gavin sends his wife through (David, naturally, is in love with Gavin's wife) and brings her back; he sends another woman through and doesn't bring her back. Everything finishes neatly in the end with Gavin electrocuted just before he is arrested, and David picking up the swooning Fennella (Gavin's wife) and kissing her, meanwhile

murmuring sweet nothings into her shell-like ear.

UP AND OUT by John Cowper Powys (Macdonald, 15/- 224pp) is of a much higher literary standard, but of little more appeal to the average s-f reader. The title story of the two in the book deals with the destruction of all life on the earth (not detailed), and the subsequent surrender of the stars and other astronomical bodies to death, the destruction of Time, or Eternity, of God and the Devil—in fact, the end of everything. The whole thing is written with a vast amount of flowing oratory from the characters—most of it meaningless, in my opinion—which constantly reverts to a diatribe against the practise of vivisection. The second tale is The Mountains of the Moon: a lunar love story, and describes the adventures of an aboriginal lunite in search of his lady-love. There is in this tale some resemblance, perhaps, to Wallerstein's THE DEMON'S MIRROR, or possibly to the more fantastic writing of James Branch Cabell. There is certainly more "story" than in the title item. However, unless you welcome a surfeit of adjectival eulogy, of mystical pronouncements; unless you enjoy glowing phrases of literary eloquence as fulsome—and meaningful—as a political speech, don't worry about this title. Of course, if you are a highbrow you'll just have to read it—even if you understand as little of it as I did.

ONE GUINEA PRIZE

To the reader whose Ballot Form (below) is first opened at the NEBULA publishing office.

All you have to do, both to win this attractive prize and to help your favourite author win the 1957 Author's Award, is to number the stories in this issue in the order of your preference on the Ballot Form below and post it immediately to NEBULA, 159 Crownpoint Rd., Glasgow, S.E.

No Escape	
Brief Encounter	
The First	
Chip on My Shoulder	
Act of Aggression	
There's No Business	

Name and Address

Mr. A. Buckler, of Doncaster, wins the One Guinea Prize offered in NEBULA No. 22. The final result of the poll on the stories in that issue is:

1. A DATE TO REMEMBER
By William F. Temple 22.1%
2. THE WINDOW
By A. Bertram Chandler 14.9%
3. POMPEY'S PLANET
By E. R. James 14.5%
4. MURDER IN REVERSE
By Stuart Allen 14.2%
4. THE THOUGHTLESS ISLAND
By H. Philip Stratford 14.2%
6. MORALITY
By Peter J. Ridley 14.0%
7. AND SO, FAREWELL
By Ian Wright 6.1%

The result of the Poll on the stories in this issue will appear in NEBULA No. 28.

SCIENTIFILM PREVIEWS

News and advance Film Reviews direct from Hollywood's
FORREST J. ACKERMAN

I WAS A TEENAGE WEREWOLF and THE VAMPIRE, though they both bear titles suggesting the supernatural rather than the scientific, actually are based on scientific, or pseudoscientific, or celluloid-science theories.

To dispose of the lesser film first, THE VAMPIRE is more a Jekyll-Hyde theme than a tale derivative from Dracula. A dying scientist, who has been carrying on some secret experiments with small animals, entrusts the palpable results of his labours—a vial of pills—to a colleague. The good doctor (John Beal) later inadvertently takes a vamp-pill, believing it to be an aspirin, and far from curing his headache it curses him with one that only a bullet (and not even silver at that) can eventually eliminate. Nothing new really happens in this minor opus. One thing I do object to is that they are more careless about the transformation scenes these days than they were a full 25 years ago. When Fred-eric March metamorphosed into Mr. Hyde c. 1932, and Henry Hull became The Werewolf of London about the same time, the changes were carefully wrought. Surely techniques have improved in a quarter of a century, but they are doing a shoddier job now than they were then, and it spoils the illusion.

TEENAGE WEREWOLF is almost first-rate but is flawed by a third-rate mad scientist. He is just a little *too* mad. Everyone and everything around him is recognizably realistic, but he polutes the picture like ham at a kosher picnic. I am not at liberty to reveal by whom, but the screenplay credit goes to a pseudonym concealing a writer who has scripted more important, major movies. Whether he fashioned the script of WEREWOLF to make a quick buck during a lull in his life, or as a favour for someone, I don't know; but the fact remains that American-Inter-national got a bargain in all but the daffy doctor department, which characterization must have been entrusted to the author's young comicbook reading son, provided he has a young son of that sort. The M.D. (Mad Doctor) has the crazy theory that mankind's only salvation is a return to the not-so-noble savage.

There's a real disturbed teenager who doesn't know whether he's a lad or lobster, he spends so much time in hot water, and finally he's persuaded to see the mad doctor for psychiatric treatment. The analyst, who would have been more at home on a TV programme called "I'll Take Your Life", is in his glory with this poor mixed-up guinea pig, and slips him the secret regression

serum during hypnosis. Once a wolf always a wolf, and it's not long before our unfortunate teenager is baring his fangs. There's one really wizard scene, chaps, where the young werewolf approaches the audience in close-up and *upside-down*, the camera eye at that point legitimately being topsy-turvy because the lycanthrope is approaching a girl in a gymnasium who is hanging by her knees from parallel bars. This shot showed imagination.

KILLER ON THE WALL is neither fish, fowl nor exactly fantasy, but deserves to be seen by aficionados of the off-trail. It reminded me mainly of a tale from an issue of Campbell's old *Unknown*, say vaguely Ron Hubbard's "Death's Deputy", with a natural explanation tagged onto the end of it. Actually, knowing a bit of the inside story on the production of this picture, I understand that the script was written as an outright fantasy, and about midway in shooting too many cooks spoiled the broth by eliminating the supernatural element and serving a souped up mundane explanation. It's a story of a man (Richard Boone) connected with a cemetery who is almost inescapably forced to the conclusion that he is a death-prone. Every time he sticks a black-headed pin in a chart designating plots for corpses, the living person indicated promptly dies. After about 7 experimental deaths Boone gets the bright idea, what if he now replaces all the black pins with white, will the people he's (without malice) caused to die come back from the dead? The answer is pretty eerie, surpassed in esthetic horror only by the classic resurrection sequence of

les gueules cassées (The Broken Faces) of World War I in the French masterpiece, *J'ACCUSE!* The imaginative effects are by Vorkapich, son of the Vorkapich who, in the 30s, showed us such memorable artistry in *Crime Without Passion* and, if memory serves me right, *The Scoundrel* (Noel Coward).

Clauvostrophiba is what America's capital suffers from in **THE GIANT CLAW**. It's roc-roc-roc around the clock as a Brobdingnagian avian from outer space (where else?) flaps its wings all over the place till Jeff (Have Testube, Will Travel) Morrow, fresh from his scientifconquests in *This Island Earth* and *Kronos*, defeats the aerial macrobat.

THE UNEARTHLY is the marquee title of the film shot as *House of Monsters*. Last season variation 4F of this madoctor-makes-bad-monsters opera was known as *The Black Sleep*.

BEGINNING OF THE END looses a scourge of Gargantuan grasshoppers on Chicago and the Windy City hasn't seen such excitement since Mrs. O'Leary's cow kicked over the coal oil lantern and all but burned it down.

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WALTER WILLIS writes for you

A few years ago, all the good science fiction stories having already been picked over several times, somebody got the bright idea of reshuffling them and dealing them out again to the public arranged as "idea" anthologies. That is, collections of stories all taking a single theme, like robots or mutations or time travel, and trampling it to death. This having been done to each of the themes in turn, the anthologists now sit nervously on the pile of bodies, gazing dementedly at the retreating public and wondering what to do next to attract their attention.

I have a suggestion. Someone, probably either Sprague de Camp or Vincent Clarke, suggested a long time ago that what science fiction needs is a series character who would do for science fiction what Sherlock Holmes did for the detective story. You see, the trouble with science fiction as far as the general public is concerned is that it requires mental effort. Start off a story with "The sun was setting slowly behind the mesa as a lanky stranger rode up to the Bar 20 ranch" and the reader knows exactly when and where he is. In fact he knows pretty well

just what's going to happen—he's just like a child with a favourite story he likes to hear again and again. This is predigested literature. But science fiction is different. Not only does the reader have to learn the names, appearances and characteristics of the protagonists of the story (who may as an additional hazard include aliens with unpronounceable names—and the people to whom much of current science fiction is evidently directed cannot read without saying the words to themselves) but he has to work out where the story is set within a radius of several million light years and when within a range of several thousand heavy ones. When he's got all that clear in his mind he has to familiarise himself with the social set-up, economics, fashions, customs, politics and linguistic peculiarities of the environment in which the author has put them. Then he can start finding out what the technology is and struggle through whatever gobbledygook the author has invented to explain it. Having accomplished all this, the carefree reader plunges into the story—all ten pages of it. As if this wasn't enough, some stories are

deliberately obscure. I read about five sf magazines a week and although nobody likes science fiction more than I do (except Forry Ackerman, of course) I must admit I find it hard going to fight my way into yet another story starting off with two pages of italics. And don't forget, I'm a *fan*. I'm looking jaded but still hopeful, for something the general public doesn't even know exists.

Well, what's the answer. When I was talking to Bradbury in Los Angeles (ahem), good ol' Ray (so who's name-dropping? For all you know he goes around telling everyone he met me!) suggested that all that was needed for the public to take sf to their hearts was for them to become as well acquainted with its conventions as they are with those of the Western. That might be possible as far as Bradbury's stories are concerned—the most important thing about any Bradbury story is Bradbury—but there are all the other authors to think of. There are as many science fiction frames of reference as there are authors: in fact more, because Heinlein is I think the only one who has worked out a consistent future history to place his stories in.

No, it looks as if the reader will always have to learn a new environment for each story. But can't we help him out some other way? Which brings me back to that series character idea. Why not a whole group of series char-

acters, a sort of science fiction stock repertory company? I don't mean that they'd be supposed to be the same people in every story—that would be impossible with the time range to be covered—but though they'd have different names they'd be recognisably the same characters with the same physical appearances and attributes, just as every hotel manager in Hollywood films is Franklin Pangborn. In fact Hollywood has already shown us the way by putting a Brooklyn cook in every spaceship. The reader would only have to learn off these characters once and he'd be able to get a running start at every other story and absorb great gobs of extra sociology without turning a hair. For the basic cast I suggest:

Hero—

Normal. Age 30, introvert, technician, lonely, drinks Scotch, overworked, likes jazz and some classics and Gershwin, has doubts about The System but is basically 100 per cent American. May be recognised by monosyllabic name, like Mark or John. (Authors get paid by the word, not the letter.)

Hero, Mark II—

With hole in head. More mature, hardbitten, private detective or journalist, cynical but astringently sentimental in last paragraph. Has hole in head with metal plate which makes him either telepathic or

immune to deadly alien radiation. In short, same as Mark I, but older and a little tin on top.

Aliens, cuddly—

Nice.

Aliens, slimy—

Nasty.

Scientist, Mad—

Found in older stories, but now retired except in stories which are intentionally humorous.

General/Security Officer—

Stupid. Hidebound.

Scientist, psychopathological—

New and improved model of

mad scientist. Either has dangerous invention which he stupidly wants to release to the world or is stupidly preventing hero from developing his.

Heroine, single—

Tall, dark, poised, sophisticated. Journalist or secretary. Stows away in spaceships. Always hates hero to start with.

Heroine, married—

Small, blonde, pregnant.

And so on. I suggest that as a start all the editors get together and announce they'll refuse to accept any stories that don't use these characters and only these. I venture the opinion that few authors will notice any hardship.

LOOK HERE (continued from page 2)

popularity until its authors and editors can succeed in making it much more attractive and convincing to the public at large and so, possibly, changing it out of all recognition from what it is today.

Our last hope if such a radical change is to be avoided is that in this International Geophysical Year the average citizen may come to regard space, time and scientific experimentation as subjects both of absorbing interest and vital moment to himself and at least as convincing a theme for his entertainment as the exploits of Audie Murphy, Douglas Fairbanks, jr., or Marilyn Monroe.

Peter Hamilton

THE RINGED WONDER *Continued from inside front cover*

When the broken-down satellite theory held sway, the Rings were thought to be about ten miles thick. Now, however, the Rings are thought to be composed of dust particles and to be no more than a fraction of an inch thick.

The only known type of celestial body that could break up into this type of formation is a comet.

Sweeping into the Solar System—much like our recent visitor Arend-Roland 1956h—the comet ventured too close to Saturn and the conglomeration of ice and dust particles was trapped and ever since has circled Saturn endlessly, each tiny grain like a satellite, fixed in its orbit by the laws of astronomical balance.

The major division in the Rings, clearly visible in the photographs, is called Cassini's Division. The Cassini Division is believed to be due to the pull of Saturn's nearest moon. There are other smaller chasms in the Ring system—so that one should really speak of Saturn's 'Rings'—and an eight thousand mile gap separates the Rings from the planet. The interior ring is the brightest, shining with a warm yellowish light.

The gleaming glory of Saturn gives no hint of the frigid surface that must lie beneath the blanketing hell's brew of the atmosphere. Like Jupiter, that atmosphere is mainly composed of hydrogen and helium with traces of ammonia and methane. Saturn is only slightly smaller than Jupiter but has a third of its mass and is only half as dense.

The ten-and-a-half-hour day and night give rise to great storms and turbulent wind belts, which we see as vaguely defined bands in the upper atmosphere. Because of the low gravity—only 1.17 times Earth's—Saturn has a greater equatorial bulge in proportion than has Jupiter.

If Saturn had no rings, it might be possible to write it down as just another Jupiter, only smaller, with an eye on the slightly different values of mass and density. But the planet does possess Rings and thus everything about it assumes a sharper importance to astronomy.

If Arend-Roland 1956h had come too close to Earth, would we, too, now claim a Ring System? It seems highly possible, if the comet theory is correct.

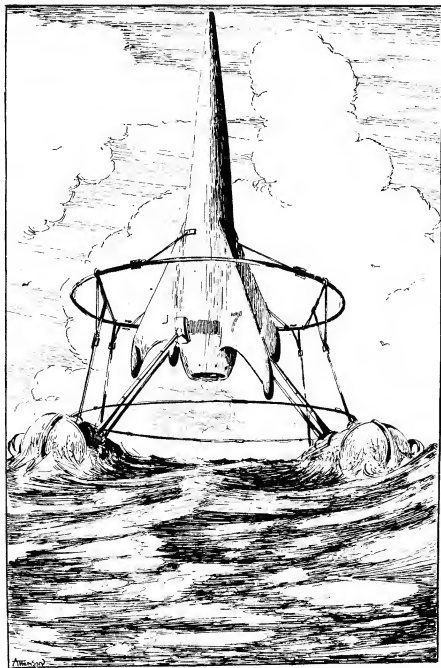
On Saturn we can occasionally see white and dark spots and under good seeing conditions we can distinguish the shadow thrown across the surface by the Rings.

Depending on where the orbit of our possible Earthly Ring system established itself, that shadow might be inconvenient.

It is not at all difficult to foresee some of the complications that might arise if Earth acquired her own Ring system. IGY might have to change direction violently in mid-investigation. But in one respect it would be a little unfair, like loading the dice.

Saturn was named as being the 'second most beautiful sight in the Solar System.' The first, of course, will be Earth, seen from Space.

What is far more likely to happen is that hotels will be erected on Mimas, Saturn's closest moon, and visitors from all over the Galaxy will come to gaze upon this wonder of the Solar System.



Another scan
by
cape1736

